THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE

ISSUE 40 • WINTER 2004/5

EXTRAORDINARY!

Steve Mohn
Paul Meloy
Melanie Fazi
David J. Schwartz
Eugie Foster
Bryan Talbot
Vandana Singh

Stephen Volk
on horror films

The Dodo

Japan's Dark Lanterns

Reviews

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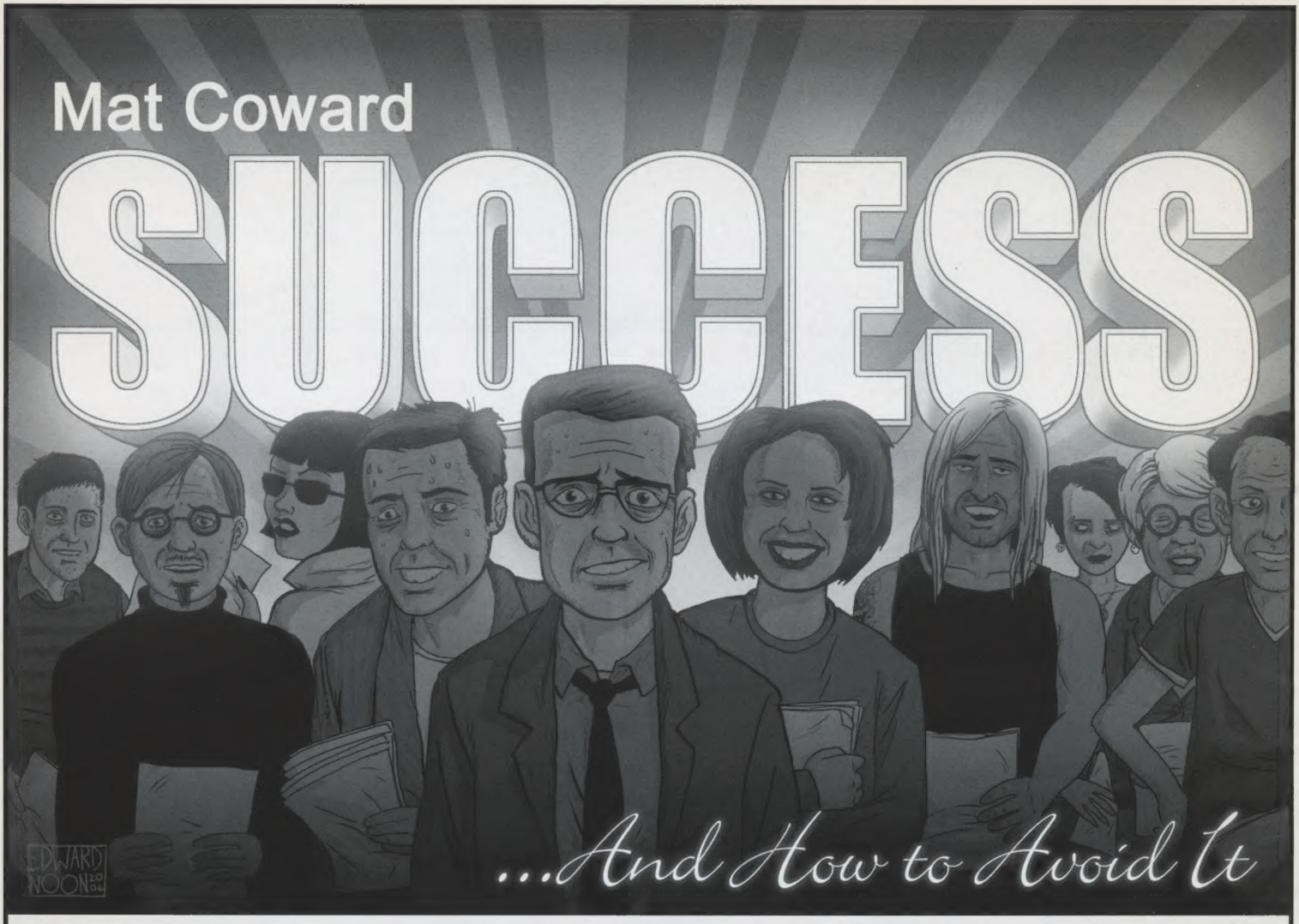

There are thousands of books for writers and would-be writers. Some of them are even useful. But a lot more people make a living writing Howtorite books than make a living as a result of them. The 'How To Make A Million With Your Pen In Four Easy Lessons' guide is part of a huge, rich, somewhat distasteful industry, based on two well-known facts about human nature:

1. Everyone who can write a shopping list thinks they could write a book
2. Everyone who thinks they could write a book thinks they *should* write a book

Mat Coward's *Success... And How To Avoid It* is different. Combining humour with practical information, and based firmly on hard-won personal knowledge, it's a tonic, an antidote, a survival kit for every writer who is fed up with being told how easy it is to write yourself a fortune.

First of all, it's a good read. Ironic, funny, anecdotal, hyperbolic — but always remembering that there is a body of information and advice which, combined with talent, hard work and enormous amounts of luck, might just make the difference to aspiring writers.

Other writers' books say "You can do it, if only you believe in yourself and follow these simple rules." This book says "You might do it, but you should know from the start that there really is, as you have always suspected, an intergalactic conspiracy of space-vampires, Freemasons and commissioning editors dedicated to keeping you in your place. Still, if you are determined to embark on this foolish quest, you'd better read this first." If Ford Prefect wrote a writers' book, this is the one he'd write.

Success... And How To Avoid It — at last, a hip writers' book which doesn't insult its readers' intelligence. For the first time, a writers' book written by a writer, which would-be writers won't be embarrassed to be seen reading.

'Freelance writing is not a lifestyle choice, it's a masochist's pastime, and in exploring this contention *Success . . . And How To Avoid It* brings truth to the old axiom of the desperate: "You've got to laugh!". If bursting into unstoppable fits of convulsive laughter — you know, when your bodily functions are seemingly controlled by some sadistic invisible force — is liable to embarrass you, do not read this book in public'
— Tim Lebbon

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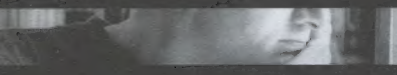
Specially designed by Vincent as a tribute to the storytellers of TTA's last ten years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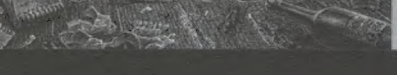
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GUEST EDITORIAL

NICHOLAS ROYLE

The cover artwork is called 'Storyteller' and it was designed specifically for this tenth anniversary issue by Vincent Chong, who says it's 'a tribute to all the TTA contributors, and writers and artists in general, who bring some amazing and wonderful stories to life'. And who, I would like to add, have helped TTA complete ten years of publishing. Thanks to them all, and thanks also to *you*, subscribers old and new, because without your support we'd never have got so far.

It's apt that Nick Royle writes this issue's guest editorial, as not only was he one of the influences behind the magazine and the writer of the first story in the first issue, and a regular contributor (and subscriber) ever since, but I remember him saying that TTA's *tenth issue* was an achievement worth celebrating. It was, not least because so many new magazines fold after just two or three issues and so many more forever remain just ideas, but even back then, seven years ago, our gaze was fixed on more distant horizons. And, you know, it still is. So here's to the *next* ten years!

The next decade begins in some style with TTA41 and brilliant new stories by Nathan Ballingrud, Chaz Brenchley, Conrad Williams, Scott Nicholson, Martin Simpson and others.

Meanwhile, no doubt some people have been thinking they might have to wait ten years for Mat Coward's *Success . . . And How To Avoid It*! Well, good news: this book has now been published. Yes, it's out, it exists, it's real, and if my recommendation is still worth anything, you need to buy it because it's surely one of the most useful books on writing and the writing life ever written, and I *guarantee* it's the funniest. This is what it looks like on the front, thanks to Edward Noon's artery:

It's bigger than this in real life and in colour, but the same shape.

Andy

I would like to celebrate the tenth birthday of this fabulous magazine by offering a partial – very partial, in both senses of the word – history of literary movements that explicitly describe themselves as new. The New Weird, you see, far from being new, follows in an honourable tradition of new this, new that and new the other.

The New Woman movement was a social and a literary phenomenon of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Hard facts, names of authors and specific New Woman titles, are hard to come by. Nina Työlahti of the University of Oulu, Finland, writes that New Woman researchers have a lot in common with cryptozoologists, who study unseen animals, since the New Woman did not really exist. So much for the New Woman. The late 1920s gave us not only art deco, but also the New Criticism. The movement placed stress on close textual analysis when interpreting works of literature. Context was of no interest, biographical analysis even less. A progenitor, perhaps, of Des Lewis's *Nemonymous* project.

The New Novel, or *nouveau roman*, flourished in France from the mid-1950s to the 1970s. Widely considered the pope of the *nouveau roman*, Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote *La Jalousie* (1957), in which the appearance or non-appearance of a squashed centipede on the wall of his house was a vital indicator of the emotional state of the narrator. *La Jalousie* became a classic example of the *nouveau roman*, and its status as a key text in entomological fiction, along with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Guy N. Smith's *Locusts*, is assured. Robbe-Grillet (born 1922) came to London to do a reading when his latest novel, *La Reprise*, was published in 2001. There are not many authors whose signature in the front of a book I will stand in line for, but Robbe-Grillet is one. Other writers associated with the movement include Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Duras.

The New Journalism seemed, to Tom Wolfe in the mid 1960s, a snappy name for the kind of digressive, narrative nonfiction he and others were writing. Tom Wolfe doesn't do a hell of a lot for me and I like Mark Kramer's putdown in his introduction to *Literary Journalism* (1995): '[New Journalism] was often uttered with a quizzical tone and has

THE NEWS AT TEN

fallen out of use because the genre wasn't really alternative to some *old* journalism, and wasn't really new.'

In 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first man on the moon. The same year saw the publication of *The New SF* edited by Langdon Jones. The anthology harnessed much of the talent nurtured in the pages of *New Worlds* by Michael Moorcock, who provides a preface as well as a story and a short poem. Subtitled 'An original anthology of modern speculative fiction', *The New SF* was not about spaceships or aliens or distant planets and far futures. It tended more towards exploration of Ballard's 'inner space'; that tendency in itself was still relatively new, as was the avant garde approach to form taken by many of the contributors. The book opened with Giles Gordon's remarkable 'Fourteen Stations on the Northern Line'. Gordon, in those days, wrote experimental short stories, later moving on to novels, before becoming an editor. By the time he co-edited the *Best Short Stories* annual anthologies with David Hughes, his taste seemed to have become considerably more conventional. As an agent, his clients included Prince Charles. Among the other notable contributions to *The New SF* were 'Postatomic' by Michael Butterworth, later of Savoy Books; 'A Science Fiction Story For Joni Mitchell' by Maxim Jakubowski, now owner of Murder One bookshop; and 'The Holland of the Mind' by Pamela Zoline, who went on to co-found *The Encyclopaedia of Life* as part of her work with the Telluride Institute, which promotes sustainable community living in the Rocky Mountain West and elsewhere.

The New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction (1991), edited by Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath, had an impressive list of contributors including Peter Straub, Martin Amis, Scott Bradfield, Emma Tennant, Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman and others, but the emphasis was on reprinting existing work rather than commissioning new pieces, which made it an inherently less interesting anthology than it might otherwise have been. *All Hail the New Puritans* (2000), edited by Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne, was an original anthology, but it was a turkey. The New Puritans took their cue from the Dogme movement in cinema, insisting that all contributors follow a manifesto requiring them to strip all the interesting stuff out of fiction and pare storytelling back to its essentials. The only decent piece in the anthology, by Geoff Dyer, was reportage rather than fiction and broke all the silly rules anyway. Watching as the New Puritans took full advantage of gullible literary editors and feature editors throughout the UK media was the most depressing experience of the publishing year.

As for the New Weird, only time will tell. Is there enough substance there for an anthology? Is there any longer the will to produce anthologies at all, unless they're edited by Nick Hornby or Dave Eggers or Zadie Smith or whoever is currently flavour of the month? Would a New Weird anthology even be a good thing? Are NEW movements a good thing? Is there any point dividing genres into ever more fragmentary sub-genres? Are we becoming too hung up on labels?

Joel Lane posted an interesting comment on his TTA message board recently. In a discussion about his forthcoming second collection of short stories, he wrote: 'I want to get readers thinking about the world they live in, not the kind of story they've just read . . .' This simple sentence resounded with common sense, as clear as a bell.

I'm suspicious of movements. I don't much care for genres either. I like writers and I like stories. I have certain writers I follow and I'll read everything they write. I also like coming across writers who are new to me. I like stories that make me feel glad to be alive, by which I mean I'm glad to have been around to have read them. I like stories that make me do a double-take on the world. I like stories that push the envelope. I like contradiction. I don't like science fiction, but I love JG Ballard. I like horror, but dislike most horror fiction. I love reading, but would happily pulp and recycle half the books in Waterstone's. I love coming across new stories by new writers in new magazines, but I hate it when writers get together and talk about *markets* and *outlets*.

I love *The Third Alternative*, but I hate the fact that when I went to look for my copy of issue one, just now, I couldn't find it. I loved James Miller's story, 'The Outpost', in issue seven. I hate the fact that my story in issue eight, 'London Wall', was to be the first chapter of a novel in which the plot would turn on a device uncomfortably similar to one that would feature in the first Harry Potter novel published two years later (it wasn't as if it was even original to me, but once something's been appropriated by the Harry Potter machine, it's sort of not really available for use, I suspect). I loved the cute dimensions of TTA up to issue ten. I hated the fact that I feared the switch to A4 meant I was resistant to change.

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I loved the new size so much I have two copies of issue eleven. I hate the fact that I can't remember the *real* reason why I have two copies of issue eleven. I loved the fact that issue twelve contained stories by Joel Lane and Tim Nickels *and* Jason Gould. I love the fact that there have been so many great writers published in the magazine, but hate the fact that there isn't the space to mention them all here. I love the fact that the editor has maintained his high standards, but I hate the fact that he bounced the last story I sent him. I love the fact that the present issue contains a story called 'Black Static' by Paul Meloy (great title, excellent writer). I hate the fact that I seem to be incapable of writing to length. 750 words, Andy said.Happy birthday, TTA.

STEVE MOHN

INSERT RAPTURE HERE

WE MUST AN ANGUISH PAY

"Please!" his sister screamed on the roof. From the lawn he could not see her but heard the thumps of her fist. "Please – *please*!"

Nick didn't want Blair up on the roof. He had never gotten on with his big sister but had dwelled from the age of ten on reverent dreams of one day fucking her. Driving out, Nick had felt that this time he might get there. Her desperation on the phone had made him picture Blair pacing with a cigarette, telling Nick to drop what he was doing, get to the inn, *see* for himself. Blair wanted something bad. Maybe badly enough to bargain big for it, grant his adolescent wish. It would let him avenge his mother too. Essentially, Blair had stolen that money, though, as always, his mother had caved in: "I'm making this investment in her *future*!"

Future. Investment. She bent Mom's arm back and wrenched it.

"*Please*!" Blair screamed from the roof of The Damford Inn, like saw teeth tearing out her throat.

I can leave, Nick considered. I'd better.

The rain and wild lightning had ceased. Puddles glinted, wrinkled by the breeze. Then Dickie Schroeder came onto the porch, trailing cigar smoke. The whole inn stank of tobacco, marijuana, now the reek of ozone upstairs, where Tab had shot Tamara, or Tamara had shot Tab?

The scotch was gone. Everything was gone. Not even a beer for breakfast. And there had been no food at the inn when Nick arrived.

Starting from Keuka College, in the Finger Lakes region of Central New York, where he taught English Lit to the better sort of, mostly, young women. He had hoped to make Burlington, Vermont, by seven or so Friday evening but road work held him up. Guys with stop signs made him wait six times for oncoming traffic to waddle by. It got late. Round-topped mountains sheltered valley towns that huddled by stony streams where all the mills had closed, where every other business was Tom's Garage or Bud's Truck Parts. Scruffy kids on hand-me-down bikes glared with a meaningless hostility that made Nick factor-in the *Take Back Vermont!* signs staked in the weeds and tacked to the sides of barns.

Damford Inn, 1 mile, left. Nick followed a creek he could just make out in the gloaming. Boulders marked it. Big trees crowded the road. Stones banged his wheel wells.

White clapboard. Black windows. *Damford Inn – 1892.* A thin board hung from the main sign: NO VACANCY. Dusty cars faced a porch jacked up at one corner. Gaps in the lattice. Weeds. A shaggy sunflower, the head slumped, stood between a Lexus van and a red Mercedes. Two other cars were old beaters.

The flat roof had a small square lookout with boarded-up windows. Sheet metal nailed to two-by-fours extended one side of the lookout, and its tiny square roof, by about three yards. Sagging wires tied down this ugly addition.

Nick felt relieved that his mother could not see this.

"Nick!" Blair had come onto the porch, a lit cigarette snowing ash. Yet she might have come from exercise class: snug white sleeveless top, those tight black mid-thigh shorts, cross trainers, white socks. Her blond hair pulled back, her eyes rectangular gray cuts above high cheekbones, eyes too close-set for classic beauty, and smoky in deep, where Blair focused on what she wanted.

Nick said: "Well, here I am."

Blair hopped off the porch, sprinted and threw herself into a hug – Nick watching that cigarette. His hands halted her athletic hips. It was not the way you hold your sister, but how you hold a woman in a bar when you dance slow.

Her smoky gray eyes watched from some other part of Vermont.

"Nick, you're the best thing that ever happened to me."

He had never heard that from her. He kept his hands on.

"You must really be stoned or really broke," he said.

Nick wanted what he wanted, and would take it if offered, but she had spit on him once: if she slapped his face for insulting her, he could live with that and leave.

Plans cooked in her eyes, her hand on his shoulder, her hips daring close.

"Did you know," she asked, "that anything can happen?"

Sex-panic flooded Nick's chest. "You look great."

Blair shrugged. "I'm in paradise."

"*Here*?"

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVE SENECAL

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "I couldn't tell you on the phone." Drag on the cigarette. She remembered to spray the smoke away. Nick had quit four years ago. She sucked the last smoke into her lungs then, theatrically, flicked the butt aside. Leaned her hips into his, arms around his neck.

It shouldn't happen, but dead parents let you do things.

"Tonight," Blair said, "we have to buy heroin."

Nick woke in the arms of a stranger. "Heroin."

She nodded. "Enough for everyone. You still have a Charter One account? They have branches all over Vermont." She rubbed the back of her neck as if (oh, dear) a headache coming.

Nick lowered his hands, tried to speak but twice gave up. "I don't . . . even know what to ask."

Blair wagged her head once. "It's just a thousand dollars. Maybe two. We need a lot 'cause we're into this now, really hard. And we *have* to go through, all of us. Not you – you don't have to go. It's okay. But we've decided. We're all in good shape now. We just came off a vasting. That was three this afternoon. They happen every thirty-seven hours. That's its period. So we're up *now*. But we sink fast without it. We sink *fast*, okay? We're almost out of things to dull the edge."

In a meadow across the road, fireflies ran patrols.

"You're using heroin, Blair?"

Again she wagged her head, once. Blair's focused precision had made her a hit in doubles tennis, high-school volleyball. She drove expertly while talking on a cell phone. As if everything were her due – marriages to big corporate people, large summer condos in Hong Kong, mahogany-hull Concordia yawls with brass fittings and winches. But also as if her life was a reality show and Blair had only days to clinch the marriage, repossess the condo, learn to sail. Her grim focus had made her seem powerful. Now Nick thought: She's a junkie. A piece of junk.

But Blair had wagged her head. "We've gone through everything else. We need the highest high to hold on, till the next vastation. And there's – "

"What's – " he winced at her " – what's a *vastation*?"

Blair shook her head once. "It's the wrong word for it – but nothing is the right word. Never mind, you'll see. But you *can't* see for, like, another day, is the problem. And I can't just *be* here till then, showing you the sights, 'less you think Burlington counts as a sight."

"I just drove through Burlington," Nick monotoned. "Well, around it."

Blair said: "There's a lot of good heroin in Burlington now. The kids there were burning through Oxycontin like mad, grinding, snorting it? So the pushers moved in. Heroin's cheaper. Dickie can get a hundred grams. Uncut."

It sounded like far too much pure heroin for the money, but Nick couldn't think it through. "Uncut heroin can kill you." He had read that. "It's too strong."

She nodded. "We'll be careful." And took a Dunhill in her lips from a blue fliptop box, lit it with a Bic she'd been holding in the hand she smoked with. She tucked the box into the back waistband of the tight black exercise shorts. Blair had rarely smoked. Now Nick smelled tobacco, marijuana, armpit.

Her pale arms, though, were clear: no needle tracks.

"Blair, look, it's . . . " Nick scratched an eyebrow. "Late. Could I – ?"

"Now," said Blair, "would be the best time to go. It's dark. We're adults – cops only bother *kids* in cars at night. I can drive. I have speed. Dickie's drunk but steady, okay? He's always drunk, it's like normal. He won't drive. Father Goren'll stay and Tab too. Tamara might come."

Nick said: "You're losing me."

"Right." Blair shut her eyes, leaning back to count on fingers: "Tamara is a dear friend of mine from Sarah Lawrence." Second finger: "Tab is her, well, kind of, boy." Blair waved it off. "Fuck buddy. They wear each other's clothes. Dickie's got the connections. Father Goren is, like, *forget* it. So it's you, me and Dickie – "

"And I'm supposed to pay?" Nick stopped her with both hands. "For this shit you want to buy? Is that why I'm here?"

Blair tipped her head slightly, wise mother of all Time pitying the dullard child, his runny nose. "You're going to be so rich. When we're gone. And you get to fuck me. All you want, till I'm gone." She slid Nick's hand between her legs. His curled fingers fit the plump notch in her exercise shorts. "You get everything you want. What I know you want. And then you get more. Are we *now* both on Page One?"

She left him outside to get used to what she'd handed him, to let the night air drift in one ear, through his head and out the other. His thoughts ordinarily formed complete sentences. He'd often wondered what it sounded like in other people's heads. In his own now Nick heard nothing, not even phrases trying to link. He refused to smell his fingers but did not dare wipe them either, as though the tips were chalked by the ashes of a cremated wife.

Vastations? Heroin? Nick glanced at the Damford Inn (for all the cars out front one light shone inside) then at the meadow across the road, black except for the fireflies running their patterns. Blair didn't look like a drinker but some drug and liquor binge had loosened her mind, whole chunks of brain slipping.

He rubbed his face down with one hand. Not *that* hand.

To speak to me that way, to offer –

I'll shower. Won't drive a mile before I have a shower. Good hot shower. Normal drink. He yanked bags from the trunk. I just have to straighten this out.

Blair, edgy, wanting to get going, stopped him on the porch.

"Well – a shower – couldn't you – wash? There's the kitchen . . . "

"I want a shower. Clean socks, underwear. There anything to eat?"

"Eat? Dickie, is there – anything?"

He met Schroeder in the lobby in a shirt that looked as if he'd wiped down train engines with it. Black tangled hair, drunken eyes. "Name's Schroeder." He stuck out a large dirty hand then waved as if recalling that, in fact, he did know better. "I'm sort of your basic asshole." Schroeder chuckled, started coughing into a fist. His eyes bulged like duck's eggs.

"There anything to eat?" Blair asked. "Nick. Wants to eat."

She made eating sound abnormal. And Dickie Schroeder, moving mucus, shook his head.

Blair led Nick past a carved counter where, in other days, one might have signed the register. An old bald man behind it wore a minister's suit and collar.

"That's Father Goren," Blair said.

"Hi." Nick kept walking as the man put back a shot of J&B, the bottle open on the counter.

"We off to town soon?" Father Goren called after. "Blair, dear!" he yelled. "We're off to town very soon, yes?"

Blair led Nick up narrow back stairs to the second floor.

"*Blair*?" the minister called, as if left in the woods.

"Why aren't the stairs in front?" Nick asked.

"You didn't see them, they're around the other side of the–"

"Christ, Blair, what's going on?"

"You'll *never* believe!" Sisterly, she took his arm.

"Yeah, I already don't, you know?" He smelled stale pot. A boy cackled but they didn't go that way. Blair turned him down a hallway to a room. "The rooms are nice. We'll be back in a few hours. You will just shower, right? Then we go?"

He plonked his bags onto the bed. Square mirror above the bureau, a floral wallpaper. No TV.

Stood waiting for her to leave. Blair stood waiting.

"You know I can't do this," he said. "Not any of this." He glanced at her, at what both were thinking, the offer she had made outside. His fingertips jangled. "Especially not buying fucking heroin – Blair!"

She stood with feet together, arms straight down, hands clenched. "Nick, you don't know what I'll be like soon. It wears *off* – the vastations get stronger the more you go through them, but it's like they take you with them when they go. That's why we have to go there too. But we can't till it comes back. And I can't be raving on – "

She cut herself off, lit a Dunhill. Nick studied her.

"Not raving on the floor in my own piss and shit," she finished, blowing smoke into the hall.

Nick sat on the bed and said: "Blair, it's after ten. I've been driving all day. I'm hungry. Your talk sounds delusional to me. It's very much against the law to buy heroin. Maybe raving on the floor is what you deserve. I take it you've gone through Mom's money? Every cent?"

Blair shrugged. "I have three hundred dollars."

"Three hundred?" There had been one hundred and fifty-three thousand. "How much dope do you people blow here?"

"Not near enough." Blair dropped ashes on the rug.

"Don't be so guilt-stricken."

Blair said: "I'm just hoping – there any left? I mean, you still have some, don't you? Money?"

"Yeah, of the little I got, thanks. You want it?"

She stood smoking, clearly waiting for him to shower or not and drive her and Schroeder to Burlington. She watched blue smoke ribbon off her cigarette.

"Okay," she said. "You hate me."

"I hated your guts," Nick said. "First you clean out Mom then you buy this fire trap, find yourself some dumb friends to party with. Have you stopped eating yet? Drinkers and dopers do. Your electrolytes get out of whack. Your heart quits. It just quits. Doesn't even hurt. You just sit there and watch wallpaper fade."

Blair said softly: "This house is special, Nick. Vastations manifest here. Of *course* I cleaned out Mom so I could buy it. And buy all the drugs and liquor we'd need. Between vastings. I don't have a choice. You don't give up something like this – as utterly fantastic and wonderful as this – just because it ruins your life, or puts *you* out a few bucks."

"Or kills your mother?" he asked. He couldn't address this 'vasting' stuff.

"I didn't kill her. She would have died anyway. And this way I'll never die – ever. I can't live *here* anymore." She gestured with arms like spreading wings: at the room, the world, the universe. "I'm increasingly no longer fit to live here. My chemistry's changing."

Nick gestured at her cigarette. "*Nicotine* changes your chemistry, Blair! It's bullshit, what you're saying – and I'm supposed to buy it?"

"No, Nick – no!" Blair leaned from the waist, as she had whenever she'd caught him in her room, going through her things, going through the clothing that made her a girl: to possess her by secretly possessing things. Now she leaned at him the same way, dangerous and powerful, older and beautiful, the big bratty girl Nick had loved so and still loved. "You're supposed to buy me heroin!"

Emotionally vaporized, he knew that he would buy heroin. For Blair, he would shoot a man in the face with a pistol.

"Go downstairs." Nick unzipped the smaller of his bags. "Get me a glass of what that minister's drinking. A double. Some ice. I'll be a minute in the shower. And Blair." She had turned to go. "You say you have speed?"

Blair nodded. "Crystal meth. Local."

He hadn't done speed in years, had scarcely done any.

"I have to stay awake. But I want the drink too." He took out his kit, clean socks. "So I want a couple lines. You do what you need to do. Here. Don't bring it with you, nothing you can't get rid of fast, in case we get stopped." He stood to get his clothes off, wanting to tear them off in his rage with her, in his haste to serve.

He would do it. Then he could hate her unconditionally forever.

They took Blair's Lexus van so Schroeder could smoke cigars in back. Nick drove. Tamara, small as a bird, black hair like a Cleopatra wig, sat behind Blair.

"I'm convinced," Tamara said, "that it's a fistula."

Nick thought: Fuck you and shut up. She talked like a tree full of starlings. But the meth and double scotch, his anger and expectations of notorious sexual fulfilment, had plugged him into a robotic state that could only listen. He drove fast enough to show any speed-trap cops that he was not hugging the limit out of fear. And meth was like acid: it made your mind race, made time slow down – made you think you were going too fast. Then you found yourself crawling along at ten miles-per-hour.

And Tamara wanted to talk. About vasting – vastation – vastacy: "I studied medicine, I told you, maybe six times already. So a fistula is like where you have two systems crossing where they shouldn't? Like remember in *Fantastic Voyage*? They're on their way to the brain, they go in through the neck, it's after they've shrunk, they're in a submarine like, and they enter the internal carotid, that's an artery, to get to the brain – they have an hour, there's a clot and he's some physicist, knows something. Anyway, they pass through this fistula, it happened in the accident, they happen that way. An arterio-venous fistula – it's where a vein crosses – "

"I *saw* that one," Schroeder said.

"It's a fistula between here and Heaven." Tamara lit a cigarette.

"Why's it have to be Heaven?" Blair asked, bored. "Why not a universe?"

Nick glanced at Blair. Her smoke whipped through a window slit, her left hand played arpeggios on her bare thigh. She hadn't changed but had thrown on a coat.

"Blair, if it was just another universe it wouldn't be fulfilling, it wouldn't be addictive, it wouldn't be absorbing us into its rapture – Nick, I'm convinced it draws only lost angels. It's a rupture into The Rapture! We're like angels, Nick – is that cool?"

"What's it do?" Nick asked, just to get some details.

"What's what do?" Blair asked.

"This vastation. What's it do, what is it?"

"It . . . " Tamara gestured.

"Kind a . . . " Schroeder gave up.

Blair said: "It misses you."

Tamara nodded. "Really, like, yeah, it . . . "

"Like it really fuckin' cares," said Schroeder.

"Wants you to be with it," Blair said.

"In it," said Tamara.

"It's like that stuff about goin' back to the womb?" said Schroeder. "It's like I *remember*?"

"Like once," said Blair, "when I was young, really young, before I was even doing memory and conscious self, I saw into it. It was like a big spiral galaxy, blue and red and white stars, and I was going to it. I could see this whole galaxy

slowly expanding because I was going there. And that sense of space around me – how can you *dream* like that when you're only three?"

"If it was before memory," Nick said, "how could you even remember?"

"It feels the same. You can feel you're out in the middle of the universe. It feels exactly the same."

"Seems to me," said Nick, "knowing you're out in the middle of space like that would be terrifying."

"Devastating," Blair said. "That's why we call it vastation. A devastation."

"Yeah," said Schroeder, "look it up."

Nick glanced at the rearview mirror but Schroeder had reclined his seat all the way. A can of beer popped.

"Devastating," Tamara said, groping for her sense of the word, "in a . . . "

"Warm fuzzy cuddle-up way?" Nick provided.

Blair looked at him. "Fuck you."

He glanced over. She coughed a thin laugh at what she had said, looked at the road. "It's real," she asserted.

Nick believed them the same as he believed they would buy actual heroin. Something else would happen. They didn't have to draw money from a Charter One account. Any ATM would do. But he didn't say it. He could withdraw only five hundred dollars per day, and Blair had said she needed a thousand, perhaps two. Nick was not going to give her two thousand dollars but could manage five hundred. Blair had three. Nick could make up the difference with the cash in his wallet.

Sparse country lights clustered, becoming shopping strips, fast-food places and gas bars that were still open. They pulled into a drive-in bank near midnight and got the five hundred, crossed an interstate highway, passed a college. Bright lights. Friday night. College kids crossing streets, a show letting out. Brubeck had played. They had driven into a summer jazz festival. The bars roared. Nick crept the van through intersections clogged by SUVs.

"Where do we go?"

Blair said: "Down to the water almost, then right."

"Then keep goin'." Schroeder sat up. "North side a town."

Grayer light, clapboard houses packed together, wrecks in the driveways. A cop in a patrol car made Nick's neck tingle. He made turns till it seemed they had driven back out into the country.

Schroeder leaned between the front seats, pointing. "That place there – looks like a body shop? Drive around back."

Parked behind the low brick building, Nick cut the lights and engine. Blair got out and let Tamara out the side. Schroeder was already out the back, quicker than Nick would have thought – Schroeder had drunk beer steadily all the way. He pissed into the weeds out back. Nick pocketed the keys. Every business along that route was closed. There were no houses.

Schroeder knocked on a back door. Blair and Tamara stood with hands in coat pockets, tense. Nick had all the money. A door scraped open. No lights.

"It's Dickie."

"How many you?"

"Four," said Schroeder. "Blair and Tammy. And Blair's brother."

"Yo, brother."

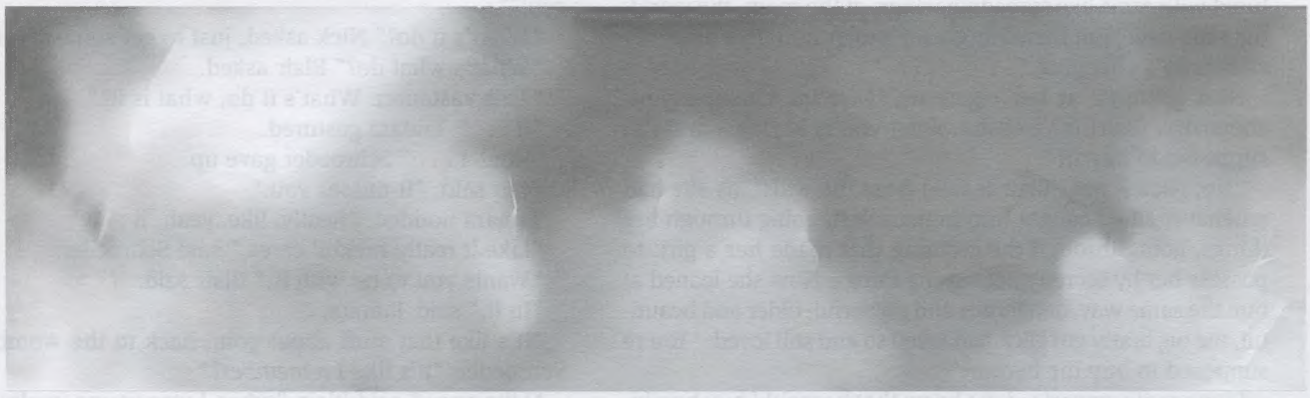
They moved inside. The door closed. Nick smelled grease, motor oil. He expected Hollywood guys – lean model-agency types – when they shuffled into a room without windows and lights came on. But saw three boys, including the kid who shut the door, a skinny black with teeth so big he couldn't close his lips. A thin black boy stood against the back wall, one foot stuck to it, gazing sullenly from under a sweatshirt hood. Hands in the kangaroo pouch. The guy in charge was white with chubby cheeks and stand-up bleached hair. A pink scar accurately described his right cheekbone, like a streak of stage makeup. He sat behind a long display table with fold-down legs and was chewing a big juicy piece of something as if he wanted everyone to see what it was.

"Big Dick!" he said loudly, grinning.

"The Master." Schroeder moved his hands into his windbreaker pockets.

The chewing guy nodded toward Nick. "Who's the boyfriend?"

"Blair's brother. He's buying."



The Master leaned a little to peer between the women at Nick then saluted and said: "Hod do?" like a farmer.

Nick said: "Hi."

The Master grinned up at Schroeder. "You wouldn't fuck me, would you? The guy okay and all?"

"He's Blair's little brother."

"*Little* brother." As if he'd never seen one. "Where you from?" Squinting.

"I teach college in Central New York," Nick said.

"What college?"

He lied: "Brockport."

The Master nodded, chewing strongly. The hooded boy did not move. If he blinked, Nick kept missing it. His hands remained in the kangaroo pouch. Nick couldn't tell if the boy had a gun in there but felt sure that someone here would have a gun. The kid with big teeth stood at one end of the table. His hands hung at his sides.

"Kay," The Master said. "See some money."

Nick stepped forward, showed it, was about to toss it on the table.

Schroeder grabbed it all. "See the stuff."

The chewing, grinning Master wagged his head then brought a small brick from his lap. About the size of a thick candy bar, it was wrapped in what looked like butchers' paper and sealed with clear tape. It could have been anything. Nick had expected a slip-seal plastic bag.

"Hundred grams. Pure."

Not for a thousand, Nick thought. Not uncut – was it even possible to get such a thing at this kid's level? A pure gram, he had read, was a hundred dollars these days. The Master should have been asking ten thousand for pure.

So when he asked for two thousand it was still a joke.

This is how she blew all that money, good old Schroeder's connections!

Nick asked: "Why's it wrapped like that?"

The Master shrugged. "Keep it dry."

"What's wrong with a plastic bag?"

The Master rolled his eyes. "Look." Sat forward.

Blair said: "Open it."

"Two thousand," The Master sat back.

"Nick's right. I wanna see it."

The hooded kid in back acquired an extra ton of concentration, looking no one in the eye, possibly looking at something he might have to do.

Nick told Blair: "Let's go."

But Blair was focused, rigid. "I'm short on time," Blair said. "I could tell you, to the minute, how short. Open it."

"You could shove it up your ass too, you know?" The chewing stopped. A cheek bulged.

"I could shove you up," Blair said, "and not feel it." From her coat she slid a flat black semiautomatic, a .32 that pinned the hooded boy to the wall. Tamara yanked a silver snubnose revolver and swung it two-handed at the kid with big teeth. "I'm an angel!" she said. His mouth fell open as if he believed it. From the back of his pants, under the windbreaker, Schroeder pulled a big black gun.

"Open up, Paul."

Paul's hands leaped out. "Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Hey!" He tried to stand.

"Siddown." Schroeder held him one-handed, squinting down a long black barrel at The Master's heart. "Open up, have a look." Clicked back the hammer.

The kid with big teeth grinned hard. The hooded boy watched the hole in Blair's gun. Paul got busy, his cheek scar crimson on his white face, but could not open the packet he had taped against any chance of actually opening it. Schroeder dug in his jeans, pulled a penknife blade with his teeth and tossed it on the table.

Paul tried to find a seam to cut but seams had not been invented –

"Cut it down the middle!" said Blair. "Cut it open, down the middle!"

Nick could have hit her for this but loved her like a movie star. He froze.

And the stuff wasn't heroin.

"My private mix!" Paul babbled over paper, tape and a gray powder. "You like snort it? It's everything I like! You can have it for a thousand – I was gonna bargain down! Honest Abe!"

Nick bought coffee at a mini-mart, wanting only the comfort of coffee.

After Paul Masters calmed down, and the hooded boy showed that all he'd had in the kangaroo pouch was a green iPod, the wires coolly threaded up under the sweatshirt to his ears, the 'private mix' had been revealed: speed, acid, coke, some actual heroin, though it was cut. Cut with what, Paul Masters couldn't say. He probably didn't know where he lived. In the van, Blair and Tamara hosed up a dozen hits then Blair put her seat back. Her eyes wore a moonlight film. There was no moon. Tamara was acting in the TV show where the man has a fob watch that stops time, then he drops and breaks it. Tamara's hand was raised as if she'd remembered something. Then that man had clicked his watch. Schroeder, who abused only alcohol and cigars, had a cigar fuming up the back of the van. Wind whistled out a rear window.

Setting his coffee in the cup holder, Nick asked Blair: "You okay?"

"It's not what I wanted," Blair said from Tamara-land. "But we're down to almost twenty-six hours." From the back of her hand, she inhaled a last tiny pile. "Then the new one starts." She licked a knuckle. "Then we go vasting. Go to the other place."

Called withdrawal, Nick thought. He had bought them time. He had to get them treatment. And try to keep his part in it from getting back to the college. He had a tenure review coming up.

He drove carefully. Thought about Blair. Sex. With her. Back and forth, he had swung on that. Like giving her money for heroin, Nick knew he would do it with Blair. Hold her, finally kiss her and taste her mouth, lightly scrape his teeth on nipples hard as coral, lick down her belly and eat her like ice cream then slide into the skin-scream of orgasm. But he would not ravish Blair. Nick wanted her alert to the act, the rocking bedsprings of incest, alert to his passion. He wanted to save her – even save her life. He realized what she had meant when he arrived: You're going to be so rich when we're *gone* – all you want, till I'm *gone*.

They have a death pact around this vasting shit – like that California cult that chased a comet. Must be.

Guns. Have to get their guns, Schroeder's, for sure. Way he thumbed back the hammer? Click. Dead set.

"Hey, Schroeder – you awake?"

"More less."

"What kind of cigar's that?"

"Fuckin' White Owl."

Nick couldn't get anywhere with cheap cigars: he knew only a little, from a colleague, about the expensive kind.

"Say, what's this *Take Back Vermont* stuff? I saw all these signs along the road, coming up."

"Oh, that's Flatlanders," Schroeder said. "People come here from like New York? Connecticut? Lot of IBM people? With their goddamn virgin olive oil?"

"Right." Nick couldn't get anywhere with that either. "Look, how do you *do* this thing you're going do? I can't picture this. What are you supposed to do?"

He had to know what to expect in their behavior, preparations.

Schroeder shifted in his seat.

"Schroeder?"

"Yeah – say we talk in the morning, okay? I'm beat."

They were out in dark country again. Distant farm lights. A flicker of heat lightning, east.

Nick slept till noon and woke starving. He showered, dressed then looked for other people. Located no one. The cars were still out front. There was nothing to eat in the kitchen, only beer and scotch, so he drove to the highway and found a mini-mart, got cash from its ATM and bought bread, sliced ham, ground coffee, two kinds of Cabot cheese and mustard. He bought a ready-made sandwich and a large coffee to go. Ate the sandwich on the way back. Standing on the porch, Nick drank the coffee. Three deer stood in the creek that wound through the meadow across the road. The ruddy fawns had spots.

Vastings ran thirty-seven hours, Blair had said. Stayed away thirty-seven more. Next one due at four a.m.

When they kill themselves, he feared.

What am *I* supposed to do? Why am I here?

Money. For dope. Till then.

But if they want to kill themselves, why wait?

He went inside to call the police. He had to stop whatever they intended to do, even if that meant putting them in jail. He would work it out later, later. The phone was dead, perhaps cut off months ago. Blair must have called him from a pay phone. Nick had no cell phone, had dropped his plan before finding another. He'd have to drive out to use a pay phone. Later.

He found the front staircase and climbed floors, walked down halls, trying doors without knocking. They all opened. He found Schroeder in bed, crashed in his underpants, face down. The big revolver he'd pulled last night lay on a chair. Nick carefully lifted it and walked out, softly closing the door. He learned how to get the revolving part to tip out from one side of the gun and used a fingernail to dig cartridges out till he saw that just keeping the gun vertical let them drop into his palm like jewelry: what he knew about guns might have filled a Post-it Note. With the bullets in his pocket, he went down the hall, trying more doors. Found Tamara sprawled on her back, boyish in her nakedness, alongside a girlish boy on his belly, draped in liquid black silks. His black net stockings had seams down the back like the straight lines most people say they can't draw. Tamara's 'boy'. From Tamara's coat Nick took that snubnose revolver, flicked the safety catch on then hid the loose bullets and guns in his room.

He had to get Blair's gun but didn't know which room was hers. He might find her in bed. Anxiety crowded Nick off the second floor and up to that lookout on the flat roof, with the wired-down extension of two-by-fours and sheet metal.

She might be up there, he told himself, hoping she was not.

Only the narrow back stairs went all the way up.

A horn blew like distant wind, wavering between flat and sharp. The horn music smelled. Like iodine. He walked through loose packing fluff, and his mind invented a word to describe the sensation: *comflamoringus*. It tasted limey.

Like I'm tripping, Nick thought, stepping into attic darkness.

Sticks of sunlight slanted through the boarded-up windows. The shapes of big armchairs solidified. This lookout had been expanded to hold them all. Nick faltered around one, right hand anchored to it, the left smoothing down the wall for a light switch (there was still electricity) but not finding one. His adjusted eyes saw the armchairs in a circle, facing a hole that had been cut into the roof but not through to the hallway below.

Nick sat. Silver leaves crackled across his skin, leaving a flavor of coins in his mouth, possibly nickels. "Hello?"

A gnat cloud of sixteenth notes too dark to see dizzied before him. Gone.

"Hello?" A pool of nothing spread like oil. He felt far from everywhere. In a dream he had taken one step into a pond and turned: that one step flung him a hundred yards from the grassy shore. Friends waved. Couldn't hear them. Knew he would never get back. It felt like that.

Sudden light terrified Nick. His skin shrink-wrapped.

That old minister stood glaring, one finger on the light switch

Nick hadn't found. The overhead bulb cast the bald man's eyes like holes in a skull.

"You scared the shit out of me."

Father Goren, in black suit and dog collar, said: "It's not here yet."

Nick said nothing. But hardly felt there was nothing there.

"So," Goren asked, "are you waiting? It'll be a longish wait."

"I was looking for Blair."

"She would be in her room." Goren's hand lowered. He looked around, as if he'd never been there. "I don't like what she brought back. Heroin would have put the right . . . " He rubbed his hands woodenly. A grimace showed all his teeth.

"Are you in pain?" Nick asked.

"I feel like a lower form of life." Goren swallowed. "Or something rotting. After it's been killed." He sat carefully. "Sometimes I thought it was toxic waste, or that gas that builds up in houses, so you have to vent it? I forget it's name."

"Methane," Nick said. "Or radium gas – radon?"

Goren said: "But it's not that. Or we'd all be dead."

"Try heroin."

"You take after Blair," said Goren. "But like a fart."

Nick sat waiting for what lay on the old man's mind to show itself.

"I found this place." Goren folded his knotty hands. "I found the vastation up here and sat with it. I thought it was God."

"Tamara thinks that," Nick said.

Goren nodded. "Blair thinks it's more like superstrings."

Nick asked: "What do you think now? Still think it's God?"

"I think it's my right," said Goren, "to go through first."

"Any problem with that?" Sand poured sideways through Nick's feet. Felt like sand, tasted like milk.

Goren glared. But horror rimmed his fury, twisted his lip, made it quiver. "That's what I'm asking you."

"I don't – " Nick sat forward, mostly to move his feet out of that pouring-sand sensation. "I don't know quite how I feel about it."

"You want to bargain?" said Goren, disgusted. "I have nothing to offer. I'm pleading. Put me through first. I've the right. I've the right – I was here first."

"Who was here second?"

"Dickie." Goren waved it off. "Do as you please. Any order. But me first."

Clarity spread like that pool of nothing a moment ago. He was there to put them through. How – shoot them? Poison? It suddenly didn't matter what they wanted him to do. All he had to do was *not* do it.

Nick nodded. "Hmm."

"You promise?" Goren leaned at him.

Nick nodded. "You were here first."

Goren wagged his head. "No. You'll put Blair through first. Because you're in love with her – in lust with her. I *know*. I can tell."

Nick pointed down. "What's this hole in the floor?"

"We opened it. The vastation seems to be centered exactly there. It was all dusty in there, like termites or ants. Dickie did that. He built this addition too."

"It's nice." The sand poured up Nick's legs. He gagged on sour milk.

"What's wrong?" Goren asked.

"Nothing." Nick stood.

"No, you're feeling it, aren't you?" Goren squinted. "You're sensitive to it! I was so afraid of this. Blair – she was sensitive. Hardly took her any time to – " Goren stood on aching legs. "Damn you!" He glared at Nick. "You shouldn't feel it yet. I'm more sensitive than anyone and I can't – but you, standing here . . . "

Standing near Neptune, it felt like.

He knew it.

Big like that, but dark.

Vast.

Getting out of there, Nick knocked the old man into a chair.

In the kitchen he drank a double scotch. Stood at a window above the sink, looking at woods. He still felt it, like thinking: Someone's in the house. And that tasting colors, hearing smells. Synesthesia.

Did Blair put that shit in my coffee last night?

Would have hit me sooner, kept me up.

He knew, before she spoke, that she was there.

"Sleep any?"

He sipped his drink. "I was just upstairs." Didn't look at her.

"What, you mean in your room?"

"No." He drained his drink, poured another.

"Pour me one."

He set his own on the table and slid it backwards, toward her, not looking at her. "I didn't like it up there," he said. "Or I don't think I did."

Tasting her drink, she went: "Blyech! I don't like this."

"That's the heroin," Nick said. "Makes alcohol taste funny, I've read."

"Too bad." Blair set it down. "What didn't you like upstairs?"

"That charming little rooftop addition."

Blair came around to face Nick. Her gray eyes seemed less close-set, had a blankness in them. She wore white underpants.

"We don't have a lot of time," she said.

There could be no more delicate light than the light that curves and cups a woman's breast. The skin translucent, soft as a baby's, the nipples sending orders to the mouth, like food. Breath hissed out of him. He bowed his head on her bare shoulder, grabbed her in one arm, weeping without tears. Held her in both arms. "Oh, Jesus Christ!" She embraced him kindly, more kindly than she'd ever done anything with him. "Don't worry," she soothed. He said: "I don't want you to go!" and took her face in both hands, sucked his lips onto hers and caught her in his arms. Tight.

"It's a portal." She passed him her cigarette.

Nick had decided to smoke again. It was clearly time. He had quit by using an antidepressant that made smokers quit as a side effect. He could go back on it, claim he was depressed.

"I guess you could call your . . . " he didn't want to use any known word for the place inside her, "a portal."

Blair squinted past her cigarette, getting what he meant. "No. That's a – " inhaled smoke, blew it out – "sideshow. The real show," jabbing the air with her cigarette, "is up *there*. All six hundred and sixty jillion cubic light-years of it!"

Nick lay with an arm around her, sleepy hands happy on her breasts.

Blair said: "You'll see."

"You're crazy, all of you, rolling-downhill mad. Insane."

Blair stubbed her cigarette, scooped a bit of powder in a long fingernail and zipped it into her head, wet her finger and rubbed more onto her gums.

He waited as long as he could then pulled her to him. Mouth on mouth.

And again. Hours more.

Hours later, he woke in the dark.

He had dreamed that he'd opened his own abdomen to find his intestines not slimy and plump but white and delicate, like flaky pastry dough – whoops, handling one broke it. Hoped that wouldn't matter later. He pulled his belly flap back down, patted it smooth.

Sat up, slid his feet to the floor. Now it's over. I leave. Never happened.

Lightning fluttered at his window. Thunder rumbled. A criminal of some sort, he stood.

It was five o'clock in the morning. Sunday morning.

They're all up there. Nick dressed. Felt with his feet for shoes. He wanted a cigarette, could have punched himself for starting again.

They've been up there an hour!

He thought it was Tamara, in the hall at his door, because of that Cleopatra wig. But it was the other one, not trying very hard to pass: just a kimono thrown on and left open, and the black net stockings that stayed up themselves, one with a hole in the thigh. Make-up smeared out of focus, genitals looking as played-out as Nick's own felt, the crossdresser swayed through a bow.

"Shall we join the ladies?"

"Why aren't you upstairs?" Nick asked the little nightmare, what was that name? "Tab? Why aren't you upstairs with everyone?"

Tab sniffed hard through clogged nostrils. "They go up there, I have more dope." Sniffed again. "You wanna do some fun? I have a couple joints and speed, I can get it up again. And there's *no* coal in this chute. I'm lubed slicker'n – "

Nick took Tab by his thin arms. "Listen, listen."

"Listen, listen, listen," went Tab, wetting his lips.

"Does Tamara – do you have a cell phone? You know what a cell phone is, don't you? Do you have one? Charged up?"

Tab scrunched his face into a really-trying wince. "*I'm* charged up."

Nick shoved him, ran for the back stairs.

"Oh, don't run!" cried Tab. "They're like statues by now. You could set fire to them and they wouldn't move. They'll be like that till Tuesday."

Nick had to shoulder through cracked green glass in the dark stairwell: the glass tasted of clean sheets. He slapped the light switch.

The bare bulb cast black shadows. They sprawled in their armchairs, gazing into vastacy. Schroeder sagged, legs stuck out, knuckles on the floor, his chin on his chest. Tamara was a puddle in her big armchair. Father Goren sat tipped over.

Not light but a kind of stain lay in that hole they had cut into the roof.

Nick knelt to one side of Blair. Her tongue lolled. He wiped drool from the corner of her mouth. "Sweetheart."

She droned. It was all she could do. She couldn't move.

"I told Goren I'd put him through first. I should have said."

Blair droned.

"I'll put you through first. If you want."

Father Goren droned, immobilized by entrancing vastacy, but enraged.

Nick told him: "You thought this thing would suck me in, like you. You got me here to push you through, 'cause you can't do it yourselves. I'm sensitive but I can take this." Nick shook his head. "And I don't care about you."

Father Goren droned, willing himself through the hole in the floor, seized by vastacy but frozen where he sat.

From the stairs, Tab stepped in, smoking pot. He had knotted the kimono sash, held a big glass of scotch. "Aren't we having the wildest party."

Nick nodded at the vacant armchair. "Why aren't you up here with them? Aren't you addicted? Haven't you been here long?"

"Long enough." Tab lurched toward Tamara's armchair. "I just never get a rise from it. Pisses me off. They all get – look at them. Like statues." He fluffed Tamara's hair. Not nicely: the Cleopatra wig fell into Tamara's lap. She had short blond bristles. "Sure. I feel it," Tab said. "But it doesn't draw me. Maybe it doesn't like me. Can you imagine?"

"Did Goren ever ask you to push him through?"

"Sure, plenty times."

"Why didn't you?"

"I told you: they're up here, I'm getting high. Selfish but – as a girl's life goes down the drain, you" (he toked) "are there."

"You're here now," Nick said.

"Not for long. Got a date with a dildo. You could change that."

"Tab, you're so fucking cute I could slobber, but don't you get what this is?"

Tab snarled. "Don't mistake me for someone who gives a shit, okay? This does not *work* for me. I get zero. I know it's some miracle space-time beam-us-up vortex thing. So blow me." Tab lurched toward the stairs. "If I send 'em through, whose gonna play with me and bring dope? I have to think of my future."

"Who should I send through first?" Nick asked.

"What?"

"Who should I send through first?"

Turning, Tab smirked. "You're seeking my actual opinion?"

"I don't," Nick said, "know what to do."

"We are so flattered." Tab toked hard. Held it. Let it out. "Leave 'em where they are. Don't send any of them through. Fuck them. Or send 'em all! Then stick with me and we'll make us a life!" Tab poured scotch into the vasting. "Cheers!"

The finest possible mist cooled Nick's face. Tab threw in the empty glass. A diamond fog stung Nick's eyes. "Stop!" But Tab cackled – that cackle Nick had heard yesterday as Blair led him to his room. Tab flung in his Cleopatra wig with Tamara's. "*Out* with the old!" Nick covered Blair's eyes, turned his face, felt tiny needles blacken one ear, that side of his face. Nick had to squint hard – Tab had hoisted Father Goren to his numb feet. But couldn't hold him. "Oops!" went Tab. Nick threw himself over Blair, tipped her chair back. Like a puppet, Goren folded at the waist. His black shoes chased him into vastacy.

Out of the hollow hum that had contained him for what might have been minutes, years, Nick became himself on the porch of The Damford Inn.

But did not know himself, and didn't try to.

He sat watching the worst electrical violence he had ever seen. Vaulting lightning. Wind beating rain. On the horizon, domes of artillery light. Nearer, the flashes fell all around, etching trees in silhouette then bleaching them pale electric blue. The thunder oddly muted. The storm went by to the west. Hot pink electrical veins lit the sky, branching roots that ran in every direction. One bolt screwed to earth and a cold green glow near the ground bloomed, fading.

The humid air gave way to cool clean breeze. The rain stopped. Fireflies drowsing in the meadow sent code to the man on the porch.

Who pulled black paper off his face in strips. The porch light came on, had been on when the power failed. The back of one hand was papered black, and the palm, the inner fingers of the other hand, one side of his face and down his shirt and pants, more on the left, and on his back, like shaggy bark.

Dawn. The overcast fled south, spinning like a fluid. Rusty clouds swept by in waves. The shreds of black paper Nick had stripped off himself blew against the porch rails.

Inside he walked on stiff legs, batting open doors with stiff arms, grunting. In the kitchen he broke bottles, plates. Fingers wouldn't bend. Had to climb stairs on knees and elbows,

stagger across the hall then push himself up the back stairs, as if on stilts.

Wind had torn some sheet metal off the lookout extension. The upended armchairs were soaked. A matte-black paper evenly covered windows, frames, a door jamb. In places the paper was deep red or tan. The ceiling was the map of an island, in which you could pretend to see a face.

From downstairs came screeches, one real scream then snaps of gunfire.

He leaped for the stairs, staggered to the second floor. Blair stood stripping paper from one arm. Black paper shreds painted her face, matted her blond hair. He knew her, had known her. From a room down the hall came a scream of rage and loss, cut off by another loud snap. Falling, a woman hit the door and spilled into the hall, her head pouring blood like a broken bowl.

Blair kept peeling black paper from her arm. "See," she said, "it comes off."

"It's Father Goren."

She considered this. "He went through."

Nick nodded. He slid along the wall, bumping his shoulder over jambs, to the woman who had shot herself. Or it might have been that Tab. The other lay in the room, huddled and punctured. Ozone stung the air. On a bureau the sheet of butcher's paper lay blank, licked clean. Domestic dispute.

When he turned, Blair had gone.

He continued downstairs, out onto the porch, onto the lawn. "Blair?"

And heard: "Please . . . "

Faintly, but definitely Blair. Nick looked around.

"Please – please!"

His sister, weeping somewhere. "Blair?" Nick yelled: "Blair!"

"Oh, please. Please." Straining from her voice all but the most abject tones of supplication. "*Please* oh please! *Please*!"

"Blair!" Up on the roof. He walked backwards. "Blair, come down!"

Schroeder wandered out to the porch and sat smoking, pulling thick cigar smoke into his chest as deep as he could and holding it. He was just letting it out, glassy-eyed, when Nick started for the house.

"Last cigar," Schroeder said. "We're out of everything now."

"You're not dead," Nick told him. "You would be, if you'd gone through. That little jerk last night put Goren through. That's what you peeled off your face this morning. He's all over the walls up there. Go up and look. His goddamn face is on the ceiling."

Schroeder said: "Sell tickets."

Blair had said: You're going to be so rich. When we're gone.

"*Please*!" Blair screamed from the roof, as if tearing out her throat.

Nick could be gone, could leave, even felt he should. But started inside.

"You seen my gun?" Schroeder asked.

Nick watched him from the door. "Did you leave it in the van last night?"

"Yeah, maybe."

"Look," said Nick, "can you drive?"

"What for?"

"Keys are in the van." Nick got his wallet out. "Here's a hundred bucks, go buy stuff. At that mini-mart. Get some beer and wine, cigars, cigarettes, food. You get back, we'll figure what to do." Schroeder sat staring. Nick clapped his hands. "Come on, Schroeder. Chop chop! Take back Vermont!"

"Great." Schroeder stood. "You find my gun, leave me a bullet." He took the twenties. Nick ran up through the house. The gun Tab, or Tamara, had used was Blair's little semi-automatic. Nick looked at it but let it lay. He didn't know if there would be police later. Nick thumped upstairs to the lookout.

Blair knelt speaking to the hole in the roof, begging vastation to return.

He said: "Blair."

"SHUT UP!" she screamed, her gray eyes crossed in rage, her mouth full of teeth. "If you hadn't come here! GET OUT!" Then hushed, leaning in to croon to lost vastacy: "No, no, not you, please, please . . . "

He turned an armchair upright and sat. The seat was dry. He looked up at Father Goren's paper face, the spread-wide instantaneous pulping of him, a sort of Goren-manure painting. An amazed and raging face.

"Please," Blair whimpered. "I'll die, I'll die! *Please*!"

"You won't die," Nick told her.

"You don't know SHIT!" She sprang up like a viper, then swung down to plead with vastation.

"It'll be back," said Nick.

"Yes!" Blair's face lit vastatically. "Oh, yes, yes! YES – please!"

"You just can't go through it. Ever."

Her glow faded. Shook her head.

"Blair – no one. No one can go through."

Blair hung over this loss, on her knees.

"You said it *misses* you."

"Yes, yes, that's why it wants me to – "

"No," said Nick. "It misses you because you can't go over. Just like it can't come here. It never was here. Just a little of it, enough to feel. But if you try to go through . . . " He gestured at the Goren wallpaper.

Blair knelt breathing in sobs. "I can't live like this."

"We'll do what we can do," he said. "We must an anguish pay – for each ecstatic instant – *vastatic* instant – we must an anguish pay. Emily Dickinson. I taught her last semester. I teach English Lit, Blair." He shrugged. "Anguish Lit. In a goddamn Anguish department."

Blair's eyes swelled white, her irises tacked to the hole in the floor, as if to the chest of a ripped-out heart. "What if it doesn't come back?"

"Blair, it's always been here. Right up here. Birds have flown into it. Tree limbs in a big wind have gone through. Once this house was built, prob'ly all the mice went in. So it chokes and kicks out when that happens. Then it comes back. You just never saw it do that. You've always had a roof over it. You never threw anything in. Nothing big. Tab poured a drink in, threw in a glass, you were there, you saw. It just sprayed out. But a whole person – "

"Should have put me through first," she said.

Nick pulled Blair onto his lap, put his arms around her. "You have to get cleaned up. I sent Schroeder out for stuff. I hope he comes back. I have to think about money. We can sell that van of yours, and that Mercedes. That leaves my car and two old ones. That'll do." He knew he had decided that the dead would be buried. No police. And Schroeder wasn't getting his gun back either. Way he smokes, he could have a heart attack. It would just be the two of us. "I don't have to be at the department till August, late."

Blair shook in his arms. "I'm scared of this. I'm scared to be strung out – I've been there. I've been living on *this*. It's all there is."

"It'll be back, Blair. It misses you too. Like me." Nick hugged his big sister, spending his warmth against the fresh morning breeze. "Vastations have to pay too, I'll bet." He kissed her forehead. "Just like me." And kissed her mouth.

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Like a character from Invasion of the Body Snatchers, a sufferer of Capgras Syndrome looks at his family and is convinced they have been replaced by doppelgangers, aliens, or robots

top
Invasion of the Body Snatchers
bottom
Dr Jeckyll and Mr Hyde

Is it me, or are all writers tortured, Saint Sebastian-like, at parties with the same numbingly predictable questions? "Have you written anything I might have seen?" Now I just say, No. "Does a screenwriter just write the dialogue?" No, dumbo, we write everything. "So do you earn a living doing that?" Well yes, it's not a hobby, strangely enough. "What kind of thing do you write?" After a pause, "Horror," I say. Invariably a look of fart-detecting disgust wrinkles their nose as if to say, and sometimes actually saying: "Why would you want to write that kind of thing?"

Why indeed? It's incredibly difficult to persuade someone about the joy of horror if they just don't 'get' it. I had a argument once with my friend, a well-known humorist, who didn't find Hannibal Lecter, that Ainsley Harriott of the cerebellum, in the least bit amusing or entertaining.

So why do those of us who love horror, love it? Why do we put ourselves through such experiences of unpleasantness, disgust and fear when we could just as easily sit in front of a nice, idiotic Adam Sandler comedy?

Certainly, the genre is dependent on our ambivalence. What disgusts and repels also fascinates and attracts. Maybe because on a primitive level, when something Different or Other reared its head, we learnt better take note, or get eaten. It's a pull-push paradox. The pull of simple curiosity to see the forbidden. The push of fear, because what if it's forbidden for good reason?

But the key is, watching films, we control it, so it doesn't really hurt us. I call it the Peekaboo Principle: the toddler who covers his eyes, keeping the pleasurable fear of surprise under strict control. And gets a kick out of the game.

On a deeper level, the Freudian psychoanalyst Ernest Jones captured it best in his study *On the Nightmare*. Horror is about a wish and the equal and opposite inhibition of the wish. For example, the vampire myth arose from the not unreasonable wish for a dead relative to return, the inhibition being, yes, but they come back to suck blood.

But perhaps it's essentially play. We want to try out and toy with these bizarre ideas within a safe environment, have these thoughts, passions, experiences without the real-life consequences.

As Stephen King once said, we're not exorcising these emotions but exercising them: and that's good. Because we all know what Papa Sigmund said about repression. In horror movies maybe we are testing if we can mentally survive trauma, and it makes us feel good if we can. After all, exposure therapy is effectively used in the treatment of most phobias, even what is called 'flooding', an almost *Clockwork Orange* style approach where a patient is bombarded by that which he fears: the logic being that the body simply cannot take anxiety forever, it adapts, relaxes, releases a different chemical, and the stimulus isn't so scary any more. The parallel between horror and therapy is interesting. Most horror themes are about subconscious taboos, basic terrors, violence, sexuality, digging in the dirt and venturing into the symbolic and literal dark.

But back to "Why do you write such horrible things?"

Well, like all writing, it's a journey: to discover things you don't know. You may as well ask a travel writer "Why don't you stay at home?"

At the root of such a rhetorical question is a huge misapprehension amongst many of the public about horror writing as an activity and we poor horror writers as a breed. The ignorant please note (and I believe this strongly): horror writers are not more sadistic than other people, we are more neurotic. If somebody asks me what I am frightened of, I will say "I'm frightened of everything!" I write horror because I want to feel safe. I can control the world I create on paper, even if I can't control the scary world outside.

What's more, I'm part of a noble tradition of wimps in the profession. In *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*, American psychiatrist Lenore Terr explores what she calls 'Terror Tales of the Formerly Terrified'.

Alfred Hitchcock, she says, never really got over being incarcerated overnight in an East End police station to teach him 'That's what happens to naughty little boys'. The experience gave him a lifelong fear of policemen, evident in many of his movies. Stephen King, Terr goes on, was deeply affected as a child by finding a body near a railway track. She analyses the influence of that trauma through several of his stories including his novella 'The Body' (filmed as *Stand By Me*). And, as an infant, Edgar Allan Poe watched his consumptive mother die on stage coughing blood. A more traumatized child would be hard to imagine. And look what he came up with.

To me, in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley too wrote

of her own deep trauma: the loss of a child. The metaphor she chose, consciously or unconsciously, was that of a man who gives birth. In a scene from her diary which I dramatized in *Gothic*, she said: "I would give anything to rub our baby's body next to the fire and bring him back to life." Victor Frankenstein defies nature by doing what only a woman should do (but Mary herself cannot), and reaps the consequences. The novel is also, of course, a parable of the dangers of Man playing God – but the monster is basically a child. (Interestingly, Marina Warner, in *From The Beast to The Blonde*, describes fairy-tale giants, too, as overgrown children: they dwarf adults just as children themselves feel dwarfed by grown-ups.)

Courageously, Mary Shelley accomplished the essence of horror writing: to render not only universal but personal anxieties in raw, symbolic form. Which is why *Frankenstein* has become the archetypal horror myth, persisting right through to the present day.

A myth onto which many artists have grafted their own private traumas. If *Gods and Monsters* is to be believed, director James Whale used the stark imagery of the WWI trenches where he lost a former lover. Thus, in the 1931 film, the resurrected, shambling Boris Karloff became 'the wish and the inhibition of the wish' personified. The dead loved one come back to life, just like Mary Shelley's. Of course, it's been documented that the bereaved sometimes have vivid hallucinations of the deceased. But strangely, or not so strangely, because we dig them out from deep inside ourselves, a lot of other horror characters and ideas reflect disturbed and abnormal psychological states.

The hairy-handed Wolf Man uncannily reflects a condition called body dysmorphia. There's a shame in Lon Chaney about an ugliness he can do nothing about that makes a fantasy role psychologically true. Dracula is obviously an emblem of erotomania. Early on in the preparation of the book, Bram Stoker wrote a telling note to himself on a scrap of Lyceum Theatre notepaper: 'Loneliness, the Kiss . . . this man belongs to me'. He thought he was penning a supernatural ripping yarn, but his own sexual anxieties showed though, to the extent that a recent critic called his novel "a kind of incestuous necrophilious oral-anal all-in wrestling match."

Like a character from *The Stepford Wives* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a sufferer of Capgras Syndrome, a defect of the recognition part of the brain, looks at his family and is convinced they have been replaced by doppelgangers, aliens, or robots. I read that one boy even stuck a knife in his father's stomach to look for the circuitry.

Delusional parasitosis, in which patient believes they are infested by insects crawling around under their skin, seems straight out of *Shivers* or any number of Cronenberg films.

And Dr Peter Chadwick's book *Schizophrenia: The Positive Perspective* features an account of his own *Exorcist*-like delusions when he believed he was possessed by the Devil. The classic *Rosemary's Baby* is so powered by the engine of paranoia it is virtually a textbook on the subject. (The patient puts irrational importance on small things; increasingly thinks everything is connected to their delusional idea; won't be swayed from it by any amount of reasonable argument; feels everyone is an enemy conspiring against them.)

What is that iconic image of the zombies from Night of the Living Dead, half-dressed, staggering across a field at night if not inmates escaped from the local asylum?

Then you have Jekyll and Hyde, the poster boy (boys?) of Multiple Personality Disorder. Stevenson's story is also a case study of hidden desires and repression, full of closed doors, locked cabinets and secret rooms.

All these stories flirt with the aberrant peculiarities of our minds, with the extremes, with madness.

What is that iconic image of the zombies from *Night of the Living Dead*, half-dressed, staggering across a field at night if not inmates escaped from the local asylum?

Is that our real, deep down fear? Even more so than death? Of mad people? Or of going mad ourselves? Is that the real role of horror, in all these multifarious guises? To explore madness, and to return to a sane world afterwards?

Perhaps our greatest fear is not death or physical pain but the pain of losing our identity – the threat not to our body, but to our self, our soul.

This isn't as outlandish has it sounds. Schizophrenia, an inability to distinguish between external reality and the force of one's own emotional ideas, is all-pervasive through horror movies. People are always thinking they're going mad. And maybe they are. This is why, at its best, horror movies are pure cinema. The external/internal world on screen is akin to a schizophrenic experience. It allows us to be mad for a while, to cast off the shackles of sanity. If only for ninety minutes. Till the lights come up.

top
Night of the Living Dead
bottom
The Curse of Frankenstein

BLACK STATIC

PAUL MELOY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BEN BALDWIN

Doors bang and diesel-black rooks maraud the dereliction. On the station platform, Doctor Mocking alights amongst a rattling litter of umber leaves. It is November and Doctor Mocking is cold. Overhead the sky is white. It begins to snow. The train pulls away on a roller of steam and Doctor Mocking walks through the double doors into the ticket office. There is no roof, just more sifting white of sky. The one wall that remains has a dark booth behind it but no occupant. Outside, there is a slip road that slopes past a silent foundry. There are factories but the machines are idle. Doctor Mocking shifts the heavy leather bag he is carrying from his left hand to his right. He rotates his shoulder in its socket and narrows his eyes as it cracks. He looks down and sees something lying on the path by his feet. A fine dusting of snow covers it. It is a small brass detonator cap, sheared neatly in half by the explosion it precipitated. Doctor Mocking bends down and picks it up. He brushes the snow off with a gloved hand. He examines it and puts it in his pocket. Above, the white late afternoon sky is giving way to an ocean of cloud coming in from the west. The setting sun lights its leading edge and Doctor Mocking thinks, It blew down on a stormfront's lip, humid jaws gashing atmospheres to strands. There is a blizzard coming. It covers the entire sky like a blackout.

Doctor Mocking pulls his collar up around his throat and looks about. There is a chain link fence following the contour of the slip road to his right. It is intricately sewn with a dead and desiccated climbing plant. He reaches out and takes a handful of leaves. They splinter in his hand with a sound like grating teeth. He allows the remains to drift through his fingers like rust. Through the links in the fence he can see the railway tracks. Snow is settling on them, between them. It settles on the windowsills of sheds full of levers. Junction boxes hum. Doctor Mocking pushes on. He can see where the slip road ends, cresting gently a hundred yards further uphill. It joins a silent, untravelled road. He reaches the road and turns right. This takes him over a bridge that crosses the tracks. He glances down and sees that the snow is falling so thickly now that soon the tracks will be entirely covered. No matter; there will be no more trains through here.

Over the bridge the road curves into town. Doctor Mocking can see the bombsites and the edges of buildings that have thrown themselves to ruin in the blasts. The grey walls have unseamed and now lean apart, crenellated as broken cogwheels, draping roof and floor beams and great yellow skirts of plaster. They look like the cabinets of terrible, burst clocks.

Doctor Mocking pauses. He is listening for the sound of water flowing quickly over pebbles, a lovely soaking sound. There is such a silence within the snowfall that he can actually hear the sound of snowflakes landing on the brushed wool of his coat, a minuscule ticking, the sound of absorption. Doctor Mocking feels absorbed; it is as if this terrain is welling up around him and holding him fast. He tilts his head and tries to catch the sound of the stream and thinks, *yes, there it is*. Like a glittering twirl of swarf in his minds-eye, he hears it. And can just make out its inexplicable blind spot, too, that miraculous beat of stillness between two bridges where it does not flow and stands as flat as pond water. This is where he must cross.

Doctor Mocking treads through the snow, across the bombsite. He doesn't stumble but is wary of what lies beneath his feet. He keeps his eyes fixed on what he can see of the distance (which amounts to little more than a vague impression of something high and dark obscured by the blizzard) and his mind focused on the sound of the water. Eventually he comes to a park bordered by railings. He continues along a path for some time until he finds a gate and enters a large and untended orchard. Doctor Mocking follows a track that winds through the trees and all the time the sound of the stream grows louder. There is some shelter here beneath the trees and he is delighted to find yellow crocuses in abundance, amongst the roots where

the snow is light, their little fractured goblets open like the beaks of bright baby birds. At the bottom of the orchard is the stream. It flows into the orchard on its slender, hectic business, disappears under a dark stone bridge and stops. Further, beyond a second bridge, it flows again, not picking up speed or trickling past an obstruction, but continuing remarkably from where it left off as if ripping out of stasis. Doctor Mocking stands between the two bridges and looks down at the still, unmoving water. His face is set in an expression of thoughtful caution, not in any way afraid or apprehensive despite the strangeness of the terrain. Doctor Mocking is a Firmament Surgeon and they are mostly strangers to fear, what few of them remain.

On the far bank of the stream at the end of the orchard is an eerie row of derelict shops. There is no reason for them to be there; they are follys. There is no glass in the windows and within, snow whispers and drifts against counters and shelves that have never held stock. One, a chill and desolate laundrette, contains nothing but a stack of old washing machines piled up which stare out through their darkened drums like the face of a vast and dreadful steel spider found nesting there. Beyond them, perpendicular to the stream and running off into the distance is a dark road bordered on both sides by high and crumbling tenements. The road is flooded and somehow sunken; the tops of streetlamps rise from the dark water like periscopes. Things float at the edge of the water, gathering in a scum against the walls of the buildings. A narrow wooden boardwalk has been constructed, rigged to the sills of the great sash windows of the tenements. It stretches the length of the road, above the floodwater, battening occasionally to the frames of fire escapes, and disappears into darkness. Doctor Mocking can see a crude wooden sign on the far bank of the stream. It says WELCOME TO THE WATERLOGS, OLD TOWN DISTRICT OF QUAY-ENDULA.

Once he crosses the stream he is committed. He feels the weight of the detonator cap in his coat pocket; it is neither comfort nor threat. It is fact. He knew it the moment he saw it on the ground outside the station. Each time it is different, each time it appears for him and each time he has the choice whether to pick it up. It gives no indication of its use or for whom it is to be used. Some of his kind choose their Instruments before they go in, some carry them permanently and they remain fixed and never transmute. Doctor Mocking always finds his and never once has he suffered anxiety that he would not. And as he crosses the stream and the cold water rises above his bootstraps, he looks down past the indolently rippling surface to the streambed and stops dead.

Lesley Morning is brought to Quay-Endula in a hot air balloon. She sits in the basket contemplating her journey while above her head the great, ornate brass gas burner roars and splutters. Lesley peers up through the crosshatch of struts that hold the burner to the basket and watches the air waver and ripple the inside of the massive purple balloon.

She has been drifting for some time now across a mapless expanse of snow. She is so high up that the balloon casts a shadow like a tiny keyhole, which slides endlessly across the landscape as if hoping to encounter its mechanism somewhere beneath the ground. Lesley thinks it looks forlorn and it saddens her to look at it. She knows she's being silly but these things are symbols. She knows what a symbol is because this place is always showing them to her. She knows what *forlorn* feels like too and knows she is projecting her own feelings onto things but can't help it. That's what happens here.

There is nothing in the basket but Lesley. She sighs and looks up again. This time there are stars in a twilit sky and the balloon has changed from a huge purple pod into a billowing fabric tiger's head. She can see inside it and likes the way the convex orange stripes flutter and glow like flames on the wall of the balloon. It is like being beneath a vast lambent mask. The gas from the burner glows green and is speckled with yellow sparks. It purrs constantly in the tiger's throat.

Lesley likes this balloon; it changes with her mood.

Lesley sleeps, curled up in the bottom of the basket. Above, the balloon glides across the night, its hollow throat a pulsing hoop of orange snarls.

Lesley dreams within a dream.

This is her gift: these focal rifts within her subconscious; like tiny gemstones glimpsed at the bottom of a wide, fast-flowing river, they lie still and complex, endlessly repeating

their structure while the dark fractal waters thunder overhead. They are beautiful, these faults, and like all things rare and priceless, they have their hunters.

Lesley jumps to her feet and peers over the lip of the basket. She has heard something. In the distance she can see a tiny speck bobbing and slaloming through the air. It is coming towards her at quite a rate. Lesley gasps and thinks, *Oh no.*

It's Nurse Melt, coming to get her on her dreadful old iron microlite.

How it ever gets off the ground, nobody knows. It looks like a huge, florid wrought-iron gate, buckled by terrible impacts, and sent airborne by a small, oily motor and kept there on wings of fabric stitched over complicated frames. But old Nurse Melt can ride it. Her huge bulk slung over the crossbar, the engine yapping beneath her ragged skirts, she grips those cowhorn handlebars, pulls back on the throttle and, hooting and pulling at her long red hair, she rockets skyward.

Nurse Melt can really handle that old cloudbike.

Lesley feels real fear as she watches the old woman gain on

the balloon. She can hear the testy little engine grumbling. She steps into the center of the basket and looks around. Her flesh is creeping and now her breath feels caught in her throat, buoyed up there by her quickening heartbeat. She wrings her hands and thinks she might burst into tears. She wants to wake up but knows she can't, not now, not on this visit, because it is the most important trip of her life and someone else depends on her. She must remain here and fight what comes at her however horrible it is. And she must get to Quay-Endula. Then she feels the lump in the front pocket of her corduroy jeans and gasps. She reaches down and pulls out an object that at once fills her with luminescent hope and causes her to utter a laugh of such genuine bright surprise that Nurse Melt, who is drawing close with alarming speed, actually almost within grasping distance of the edge of the basket, looks up and cocks her head at the sound. She can see just the top of the back of Lesley's little blonde head and that laugh makes her face twist with fury. Nurse Melt takes her hand off the throttle and reaches out for the basket.

Doctor Mocking bends his knees and blinks. He removes his glove and reaches down into the water.

Lesley turns and sees Nurse Melt's great, mad, broad face hanging over the edge of the basket. Her hand is clawed, nails digging into the weave. She grunts with effort, somehow controlling the microlite with her left hand. It drops and sways beneath her but she clamps her thighs around it and pulls down on the lip of the basket so that it tilts and Lesley begins to slip. Lesley shakes her head. She can hear the burner above sputtering as the gas starts to give out. They will sink to the middle of nowhere and Nurse Melt shall have her. A tear spills down Lesley's cheek; Nurse Melt's grin grows wider and the gas jet falters.

There are strawberries growing at the bottom of the stream. They seem quite happy there, small and flawless, a clump of crimson amongst the pebbles, no bigger than fingertips. Doctor Mocking twists one from its stem and puts it in his mouth. It is icy cold and sweet and he closes his eyes with pleasure. There are six or seven more strawberries and he gather them all. And as he picks the last one he feels a slight sensation of gentle movement around his feet and sees that the stream is flowing now between the two bridges. He puts the strawberries in his pocket and crosses to the far bank. He walks past the shops and turns into the drowned and sloping road. He feels momentarily uneasy; there is something about slopes he dislikes. They draw you down.

The basket is sloping towards Nurse Melt. Lesley makes a supreme effort to jump backwards and manages to grab hold of one of the sand bags that hangs from a hook on the wall of the basket. The microlite's engine makes a muted *thump-thump* sound as it idles in neutral beneath the ashen slabs of Nurse Melt's haunches. She takes her other hand off the bike and uses it to add leverage to the edge of the basket. Lesley feels the bottom tip alarmingly and she clings to the sandbag with all her might.

"Wake, you little bitch!" Wake *up*!" Nurse Melt hisses.

Lesley shuts her eyes and remembers her dream within this dream. The cool flowing water and the rubies in among the stones. The basket lurches again and the wings of the microlite rock like a seesaw. Nurse Melt's hair flies about her head and her lips smack and her wicked eyes roll. She starts to heave herself off the saddle and into the basket. A bare knee comes up like a lumpy, uncooked loaf.

Lesley opens her eyes. Nurse Melt teeters on the edge of the basket and glares at Lesley from beneath the burner's copper struts with a gloating and moronic glee.

Lesley can only think to do one thing.

"For Anna," she whispers, and uses all her strength to unhook the sandbag from the wall of the basket.

Nurse Melt's expression changes.

Doctor Mocking stands for a moment at the foot of the splintered, sand-colored wooden steps that lead up to the planks of the tethered walkway. He looks up and sees a line of wires strung taut against the lightening sky. Time has no logic here; it is already dawn. He mounts the steps and starts out along the walkway. There is a rope guide-rail at waist-height but he ignores it and walks straight and true, passing windows on his right, ducking and stepping through the frames of the fire escapes. His steps sound like yelps in the throats of wooden dogs. The water below lies flat and deep and dark. Occasionally something knocks against the underside of the walkway like the tiller of a boat bumping the side of a quay. Then something catches his eye. He turns and peers through one of the large sash windows into the unadorned room beyond. The room is so huge he cannot see the far wall. There are machines in there with pulleys and flywheels connecting them and great gray belts plunging through slots in the floor. Curving, flaking pipes buttress the ceiling from which hang fitments and rows of complicated, segmented ducts. He can smell the heavy oil and bare metal through the glass. He is about to try the sash when he feels movement beneath his feet. He turns.

Ah, he thinks, *here you come.*

Nurse Melt just has time to scream as Lesley crashes into her and the point of the hook connected to the sandbag slides into her mouth and through her cheek. As Lesley heaves it over the side, the weight of the sandbag jerks Nurse Melt's head sideways and she is flung off the microlite and into space. Lesley stands on tiptoe and watches as she drops like a stone into the white chasm of air. The microlite stalls and swoops into a spiraling nosedive after her. Lesley closes her eyes and sinks to her knees. Her foot connects with something and she looks down. Bronze John glares up at her with his fearsome eyes, his black lips peeled back in a grin revealing tiny, sharp white teeth. He is grubby and has a plastic front leg caught between the weaves in the bottom of the basket. His tail curls back like a tiny orange crook. He is a four-inch long, die-cast plastic tiger with faded black stripes and he has been Lesley's constant companion for over two years. Lesley took him off the dashboard of her father's car the day after he died. She talks to him and Bronze John listens, his small orange muzzle wrinkled in a knowing grin.

Doctor Mocking watches as Fluffplupps comes sagging up the walkway. His head is nodding and his saturated cloth fists are dragging two perished dogs behind him. They leave a trail of soot and carnage. There is the sullen activity of flies. He holds the dogs by their muzzles but still they utter a continuous servile whimper. Their eyes are gone; leather buttons have been pushed into the empty sockets. Their hindquarters have been stamped flat and savagely burned. The fur peters out just below their forelegs and becomes a sodden, matted, carbonised sack. Fluffplupps lifts his flat face and sees the Firmament Surgeon step out from the shadows beneath the sash window and halts. His bone-coloured eyes glitter and he utters a furious hiss. He lets go of the muzzles of the perished dogs and they drop to the planks. They writhe and mewl there, leaking and foul. Fluffplupps lifts his arms and Doctor Mocking can see the sharp, rusty cables that articulate him piercing the stinking cloth of his body. Fluffplupps lurches forwards and Doctor Mocking

turns quickly to the window and lifts the sash. He hoists himself into the room then closes the window just as Fluffplupps slips and staggers up to the sill. They stare at each other through the smeary glass. Fluffplupps puts a hand against the window but does not have the strength to open it. Fluffplupps is feeble; he is here to distract and alarm, not to hurt. Something else would do the hurting, something much worse than Fluffplupps. Doctor Mocking turns away from the window and crosses the room. He can hear the sound of Fluffplupps' exposed wires scraping and jarring against the glass.

And here in the balloon, a wonderful thing is happening. As the balloon loses height and drifts towards the ground, Lesley asks Bronze John for help. She holds him in the cup of her palms and whispers and chats and kisses his head and *believes.*

There is a tremendous elemental sound, as of a vast pack of beasts bursting simultaneously from wild and baking under-

growth. Pressure and turbulence rock the basket. Lesley squints and lets out a small cry. Her teeth ache and she bites her tongue.

She opens one eye, and everything is tiger.

Doctor Mocking negotiates the machinery. There are turbines and generators and great constructions of slats and dials that he cannot identify. There are ranks of gas cylinders labeled with letters and atomic numbers from the periodic table. He knows that many of the cylinders contain elements that could not possibly be held in a gaseous state under normal circumstances; he sees Nitrogen, Radon, Helium but also Antimony, Bismuth, Silver. Somehow these tall, slender tanks stir strange memories and he gazes up at their dusty shoulders and compass-sized gauges with a longing he has not felt for a long, long time. He shifts his bag from one hand to the other and flexes his fingers. He walks on, across a floor of dusty blue marble, between the engines, until he reaches a door at the far wall. Without hesitation, he opens it. There are two sets of stairs. Those that descend progress into darkness. There is something down there, and Doctor Mocking thinks, *Bismuth, wandering lost through a basement of brass looms,* with a sudden and interlocking clarity. He puts his hand in his pocket and feels the detonator cap. He smiles. *I'll help you,* he thinks.

But not yet. He takes the ascending stairs. And as they curve and become steep and cold, and as the concrete begins to darken and stink, he knows that he is getting close. Eventually, the stairs open out into an alcove containing the entrance to a corridor and an ungated elevator shaft. From hundreds of feet below he can hear mechanisms clacking and whining as the elevator continuously rams the wrenched and twisted walls of the shaft. There is a balcony boxed in with reinforced glass. He goes over and looks out. There is a new darkness approaching. Great black juggernaut slabs of it, high as the cloudbase. *Humid jaws gashing atmospheres to strands*; it's the devil-in-dreams, come to feed.

The devil-in-dreams brings your sins with him. Sometimes they are white and vast and tower above him, featureless and blind, and shudder dumbly in his wake; others are like fluted blown glass things that scamper and come at you. When your dreams are of failure or longing he is never far away. He is that presence you feel abroad somewhere in the dream town with the wide dusty streets lined with gas-lit, slumbering bars. He despises these less-than-angels, these *Firmament Surgeons* who sanctify the spaces they travel, so that all around on conscious planes people can come awake, and wipe their eyes in the fragile hope he wants destroyed. He wants no resolution, no healing of deep wounds. He wants your loss because it sustains him and stocks his vacuity; its mass is the gravity that binds his whole.

Doctor Mocking puts down his bag and turns as the elevator batters its way past the obstruction and begins to ascend. The devil-in-dreams is at his back, a colossal membranous mass

bearing down on the building. *How it has grown*, thinks Doctor Mocking, and with a dawning submission to the fact: *there aren't enough of us to contain it any more.*

Bronze John turns his huge head to look down at her. Lesley digs her hand into the fur at the top of his haunch. It is as soft as feathers. She looks up into John's eye. The sun reflects in it and for a moment, Lesley Morning can see nothing merciful in that eye. She wonders for a moment how ever she could have spent so long gazing into it and seeing sweetness; not in a tiger's face with its furnace of rebel flags, its tremendous awareness of its Earthbound might. A tiger thinks: *what could I have been?* Bronze John looks up at the tall, bright sun and sees a forsaken place, a veldt of world-high fronds and knows he is the only animal fit for that sun. He might mourn a little for his languid lifelong roam across those roaring plains, the relentless hydrogen jungles of the sun.

Bronze John expands his chest and drops his barrowload of jaw.

Doctor Mocking walks to the lip of the shaft and looks down. Rising toward him is a large, cubic machine made of metal bars and dark wooden struts. It is climbing the shaft using a complex collection of fitments that strike out and haul it upwards at terrific speed. He can see its workings, the belts and pulleys and wheels that drive it, revolving and threshing. At its heart is the driver, pinned and shackled to its levers, shrieking amidst the ferment: the *vitreophim*, the devil-in-dreams' own murderous acolyte. Doctor Mocking has heard talk of such things, strange rumours picked up over time, of constructions made to house these forged attendants; Uproar Contraptions they are called and here one comes now, a clattering frame of shearing edges, with its driver's maddened face turned up and glaring with eyes like calid holes of steam.

Lesley shivers and smiles a fierce, tight little grin. Her eyes narrow and her shoulders hunch. She can feel it now, starting inside there, not far from where her hand is grasping lava-bright fur, an inner striking of flints; a whoosh within the great cat's trunk and upwards it comes, ablaze. Fuming. Triumphant.

Bronze John roars.

Doctor Mocking feels the building rock. He stumbles backwards, away from the clambering horror rattling up the shaft, turns and starts to run down the corridor that stretches away from the alcove. As he runs, the Uproar Contraption reaches the opening and flings out an array of filaments. Their tips come down like pick axes, impacting the concrete floor in an explosion of gray shards. It ratchets and grinds against the dull stainless steel edges of the elevator door as it heaves itself through. The vitreophim squeals and its eyes glow in the darkness of the alcove. The devil-in-dreams is massing against the side of the building and the vitreophim shudders and chatters when it sees him, the blown glass limbs crazing with exertion; something fractures and a chunk of it slides off to be ground to dust in the teeth of the machine.

Doctor Mocking's heart is racing. For the first time he is beginning to feel afraid. This is taking too long. *Where are you?* he thinks. Behind him, the Uproar Contraption has begun to pull itself into the corridor. He can hear it building speed, scraping along the walls and pulverizing the unlit rectangular light casings built into the ceiling as it squeezes beneath. They explode with a sound like windscreens punching out in a head-on collision.

Bronze John roars and the sound is like a mile of shale cliff-face crashing into the sea. The balloon is filled with it, and as it begins to rise Lesley looks over the edge of the basket. She leans against her marvelous tiger and feels his soft bonfire flank against her cheek. She can see the outskirts of Quay-Endula in the distance. Something dark is walking there. She looks up at Bronze John who is standing with his head and shoulders between a rack of copper struts. He rests his massive paws on the lip of the basket and narrows his almond eyes. John sees the darkness, too, and his instinct is immediate and all consuming; he wants to fight it, to kill it, to tear it apart. He tenses. Lesley reaches up and strokes his back and can feel the low, almost subsonic rumble of his molten purr, like some slow, heavy core revolving in the dark heat of his belly.

They continue to drift in this fashion and soon they are above the great waste of the bombsites. Snow fills the craters and adorns the battlement edges of blasted buildings. Lesley sees the orchard and the stream that winds through it. There is a vast tower block dwarfing the rows of tenements that line a sunken road. And beyond that, the glutted mass of the devil-in-dreams presses its eyes to the walls, and applies its pressure. The block shudders and the back of the building begins to drop away. Masonry thunders.

Doctor Mocking feels the building quake and he staggers to a stop. He turns, leans against the wall and watches with a feeling of absolute, existential hopelessness as the Uproar Contraption comes into view. The vitreophim burns in its middle, a purple incandescence to match its rage, and the light it disgorges throws a sliding frame of flickering shadows ahead of it. Suddenly, Doctor Mocking is jerked backwards as the corridor twists violently. There is a piercing shriek and the Uproar Contraption is caught, jammed between the sharply compressed walls. Cracks appear and a section of concrete smashes to the floor about a foot away from Doctor Mocking. He feels the tremor as vast sections of the building crumble away and he is suddenly left standing, like a high diver, as the end of the corridor and most of the floors above peel out and drop away. He is exposed to the deep distance, and has no time to throw himself backwards because the girders are moaning and warping and a fissure has jagged between his feet and the floor is gone. So, Doctor Mocking falls.

This place, this Quay-Endula, where Lesley comes so many nights, mostly alone, mostly seeking something almost always within grasping distance but never quite . . . this place from which she wakes with an emotional flatness, a kind of bleak nostalgia, with its complex lanes and twilit shop fronts, its canals and tired, crumbling beauty, is her safe place, her hiding place both for herself and, as she will discover, for those she loves. Lesley doesn't know what her gift is yet but is learning, and this meeting place, this Quay-Endula, is where she comes to find herself.

But now something else has found it, too. Bronze John snarls low in his throat. His black lips ripple and show red gums and huge, ferocious teeth. Impressed by those terrible, exciting jaws, Leslie is caught by surprise as bronze John suddenly tenses and, like lightning, lashes a paw over the side of the basket. She cries out and takes a step back.

He closes his eyes as he falls. No slow dream-tumble this; he drops towards the ground like a piece of iron. He wonders what will happen now that he is gone, who will stop the devil-in-dreams before it becomes so mighty that it will fill the sleeping heads of all humanity and finally darken hope for good. There will be no more healing, no more peace. Doctor Mocking feels a crushing wave of regret overwhelm him. Suddenly, an enormous weight thumps against his back and a branding heat

cuts into his shoulder blade. He gasps and opens his eyes as he is swung through the air like a toy on a fairground grab. When he comes face to face with the scimitar grin on a tiger's blazing face he feels a sense of recognition as intense as *déjà vu*, and dangles there from a paw, trying to think. Then he sees the little girl, and she sees him, and now he no longer has to think. His sinuses fill with a rush of hot, desperate emotion. He lifts his arms as he is carried over the edge of the basket and is put down by the child. He falls to his knees.

"Oh, hello, love," he says.

"Hello, dad," says Lesley and bursts into tears.

Together, they steer the balloon towards the ground at the bottom of the orchard. It lands quite gracefully, the balloon sinking slowly between the trees like something wistfully fainting. Bronze John is a toy again. Doctor Mocking holds him and smiles. He hands him back to Lesley. "I'm glad you saved him," he says. Lesley looks up at her father. She has such love for him she feels she might break apart. "Are you here to help Anna?" she asks. Doctor Mocking puts a hand on her head and feels the warm softness of her hair. He closes his eyes tightly. "In a way," he says.

He puts his hand in his pocket and pulls out one of the strawberries. He gives it to Lesley and watches as she puts it in her mouth and eats it. Lesley is in an extremely happy place right now. Her dad is back. She has red juice on her lips. Doctor Mocking runs the ball of his thumb softly across her mouth, presses the thumb to his lips, kisses it.

They sit for a while in the bottom of the basket, Lesley cuddled up against her father. They say very little. When Doctor Mocking feels Lesley's head nod against his ribs, he looks down and sees she has gone to sleep. He carefully gets up, rearranging his little girl in a more comfortable position. She lies curled up, a faint smile on her lips. He takes a moment to pick up Bronze John and look at him. He smiles, remembering how it had made Lesley laugh when he had stuck him on the dashboard of his old car, a mascot to keep him company on his long drives. He puts the tiger down by Lesley's head. He bends down and kisses her then he straightens up, clears his throat, wipes his eyes and steps out of the basket. "Sweet dreams, love," he says and heads back towards the suspended wooden walkway. There is a room down there, and an old friend, wandering lost in a labyrinth of brass looms. Doctor Mocking puts his hand in his pocket and takes out the detonator cap. His Instrument, his key. He squares his shoulders and mounts the steps.

Lesley sleeps. She dreams within a dream.

Something is coming down the wooden steps, quietly so as not to wake her. It creeps past the sign WELCOME TO THE WATERLOGS, OLD TOWN DISTRICT OF QUAY-ENDULA and crosses the grass. It reaches the balloon and places its cloth hands on the roll of weave at the top of the basket. Bent and rusty wires, sharp as needles, tick against the wickerwork. With a grunt, Fluffplupps hoists himself up and into the basket. He looks down at the sleeping girl and his bone eyes gleam. And a moment later, is thrown against the wall of the basket by a wave of pressure that literally knocks the stuffing out of him. Bent double, he looks up and can find no will to utter a sound; he can only weep a filthy tear as Bronze John bears down to finish it.

Lesley kneels at the end of her bed in a tangle of sheets. She looks down at Uncle Michael, who lies unmoving on the floor beside her sister's bed. His face is contorted and blue and he is quite clearly dead. Next to him, torn to shreds, are the remains of the horrible little cloth doll, Fluffplupps. Something has chewed it to ribbons. Uncle Michael would use it to pacify Anna on the nights he came in. Anna hated it; she said it felt full of thorns and wires, and it smelt of unwiped bums, but she would hug it anyway, and close her eyes and make sure Uncle Michael never, ever touched her little sister the way he used to touch her.

Anna's bed is empty. Lesley turns bronze John over and over in her hands. She climbs off her bed and goes over to Anna's side of the room. Uncle Michael has knocked Anna's side table over and the digital alarm clock is flashing a crimson 00:00 from beneath the bed. The room strobes queasily and Lesley bends over and unplugs the clock. She stands for a moment by the side of Anna's bed, then reaches out and places Bronze John on her pillow. He reclines there, grinning. Lesley is content; wherever she has sent Anna, she knows she will be safe now.

Then Leslie turns and kneels by Uncle Michael's head. It is twisted towards her and his lifeless eyes stare up at her from a patch of shadow beneath the bed. Leslie is so sure of what she needs to do next that she does not even remotely question how strange it is.

Using both her small hands, she prizes Uncle Michael's mouth open. To Lesley's relief, his mouth is quite dry and opens without too much effort. His tongue is slumped in the pouch of one cheek. She hunches her shoulders and puts her nose to his mouth and sniffs. The unmistakeable, cloying smell drifts up out of his mouth and Lesley, with a deadly serious expression, puts her fingers in and pokes about. She pulls a face but nonetheless continues rooting until her fingers touch the thing lodged in his windpipe. It feels fleshlike, a pulpy lobe grown across his throat. Leslie removes her hand and peers at her fingertips. They are stained a darker pink, like watery blood, and she holds them delicately to her nose.

Yes. Strawberry.

Paul Meloy lives in a village in Cambridge. He works as a nurse in a crisis assessment team in Bury St. Edmunds. 'Black Static' is his fifth story for TTA since his debut 'The Last Great Paladin of Idle Conceit' in TTA14. He is still working on the story about the pandas amongst other half completed enterprises.

The second *Abarat* volume, *Days of Magic, Nights of War*, is a sumptuous treat for readers of all ages. Delivering a stimulating poke to the imagination, it takes fantasy stories into the realm of the truly fantastic, assailing us on all sides with illustrations of strange and wondrous beasts as we travel through the Archipelago of Abarat.

The Archipelago is made up of one island for each hour of the day, plus the mysterious twenty-fifth hour where anything can happen. Candy is still in Abarat – after being drawn in from Chickentown, her home, in book one – and she's travelling around attracting friends and unwanted attention.

She's being pursued by the deadly Criss-Cross Man, a minion of one Christopher Carrion, the Lord of Midnight. Carrion and his evil grandmother Mater Motley don't want Candy interfering with their own dark plans for the Abarat Archipelago and it looks like they'll get their way when Candy is separated from her friend Malingo and is finally captured to be brought before Carrion himself. Malingo, meanwhile, finds new friends on a sailing boat but little does he realise his importance to Candy's future . . .

Aimed at the young adult market, Barker has changed his style for the new age group. He's developed a more straight forward approach, with less complex sentence structure and simpler language. The presence of hundreds of Barker's own paintings illustrating the characters and locations of the story also help to de-clutter the text, reducing heavy detail and allowing Barker's writing skills to soar unfettered.

Other aspects appear simplified too. The characters display no shades of grey, they are either good or evil, with the exception of Christopher Carrion and Letheo (Carrion's slave), but maybe Barker is being crafty. He's already been manipulating the readers – in book one, Candy's sixteen year old character didn't display any of the hormonal turmoil/self doubt personality traits you'd expect from a developing teenager, and it's not until book two that we start to understand why.

There's also a sense of fun present beneath these manipulations. Barker is clearly playing with words in both volumes so that each character, island, boat and beast arrives with a melodic nametag and a whole host of subtexts attached. For example, it can't be a coincidence that the locals are known as Abaratians – phonetically equivalent to 'aberrations'. Christopher Carrion has both Christ and dead meat in his name. And if you turn the book cover upside down, the title still reads *Abarat*!

There's no time to spot the name play as you're reading though. Barker has clearly finished the world building and is now letting rip. The pace quickens and the plot splits into several strands featuring Candy, Malingo, Chickentown, the twenty-fifth island and Christopher Carrion separately. For Candy, it may seem as if she's bouncing around the islands in some weird pinball game but there are layers of story here. Some layers will be resolved in the climax (an unusual but appreciated feature for mid-series volume) but other, larger issues are certainly rolling over into the next two volumes. Their resolution will hopefully continue to be as much fun as the journey so far.

David Armstrong

SA: With over 500 paintings of Abaratian locations and people now complete, what was the very first Abarat painting to arrive on canvas?

CB: It was the portrait of [the evil wizard] Kaspar Wolfswinkel in the first book, where he's standing there with all his hats on, wearing his yellow suit, and with the Tarrie cats to the left watching him. It was a kind of comical painting, which was very far from what I'd previously been doing or intended to be doing. I was *supposed* to be doing a series of erotic paintings for an exhibition in LA which I had done every year for the three/four years previous to that time. And Kaspar just appeared on the canvas in place of anything faintly erotic, and I didn't have any idea what my head was cooking up.

DEFINITELY CHICKENTOWN | CLIVE BARKER INTERVIEWED

SANDY AUDEN

SA: When did you know it was Abarat that was coming out?

CB: Now I'm going to sound very dumb – about two years and two hundred paintings later! I eventually faced up to the fact that I wasn't just doing these for fun, but that there was a world here. I wasn't just painting characters, I was doing landscapes but they weren't consistent landscapes, they seemed to suggest a real breadth of possibilities. And it was then that I sat down away from the paintings and thought about what this could be.

I'd been trying to get HarperCollins to allow me to write and publish something along the lines of Narnia – in the sense of it being a collection of books about the same world. I think the publishers had said 'No' about four years before I eventually did the Wolfswinkel painting. My mind had actually been cooking things up for a while, and it just had a passion to make this work somehow. As I had been stymied on the writing part of it, I think the painting side of it had decided to erupt in its place.

A long, long time before all this, I had conceived of doing something like a book of hours. It's a medieval idea where a painter and monk get together and make a one-off copy of a book which could be consulted for prayers and meditations at any hour of the day. So if you wake up in the middle of the night, you can go to your book of hours and look up some useful things. I've always loved that idea, it always seemed really cool to have a book divided up into hours. And that's when the whole motion of turning it into a topography came, let's have an archipelago of hours.

SA: How did you decide upon your new, simpler style for the younger market?

CB: I think as any writer will tell you, simplicity is the toughest thing of the lot. I didn't have any problem dropping the sex and violence but it was tough at first to figure out a style I wanted. I didn't want C.S. Lewis's style – very simple, two clause sentences at most, with very straight forward language – but I looked at everything and ended up feeling as though an older style of writing would be best, like Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. And I didn't want the text to be straight forward either. I wanted there to be room for more elegance of language, maybe some words that would make a young reader go to a dictionary. I didn't have problems with that and I think it's turned out all to the good. The more complicated language certainly doesn't seem to have turned off younger readers at all. But *Abarat* is still much simpler than the adult books and I enjoyed forging that style. It was a question of finding it in the first book and once I'd got it, I was off to the races.

SA: How many drafts did you go through for this volume?

CB: I actually wrote this second book twice. The author Joseph Conrad said that the great method he recommends to other authors is they should read their text aloud at least once before they publish it. They will discover things in reading it aloud that they would not have known if it had simply been left on the page. And I've always done that. I read the first draft of book two aloud and found I didn't like it.

I was severely depressed at first. Then I called my editor in America to say I've been working on this book for a year and it's not as good as I wanted it to be – the readers deserve more, deserve better. My editor said, rather grimly, what are you going to do with it? And I said, I'm going to destroy it. So I destroyed all the manuscript's except for one handwritten draft.

SA: It must have been a hard decision?

CB: It was, but this is a quartet of books: if I got this wrong I was building the rest of the house on sand. Not only would I have screwed up the second book, but I would screw up every book that came after it because the narrative would have been taken in a different direction. There is almost nothing in common between the first version and the one that has been published. Different people die, different people survive. The first one just wasn't the better book. A year after destroying the first version, I sent my editor the new book, the right one.

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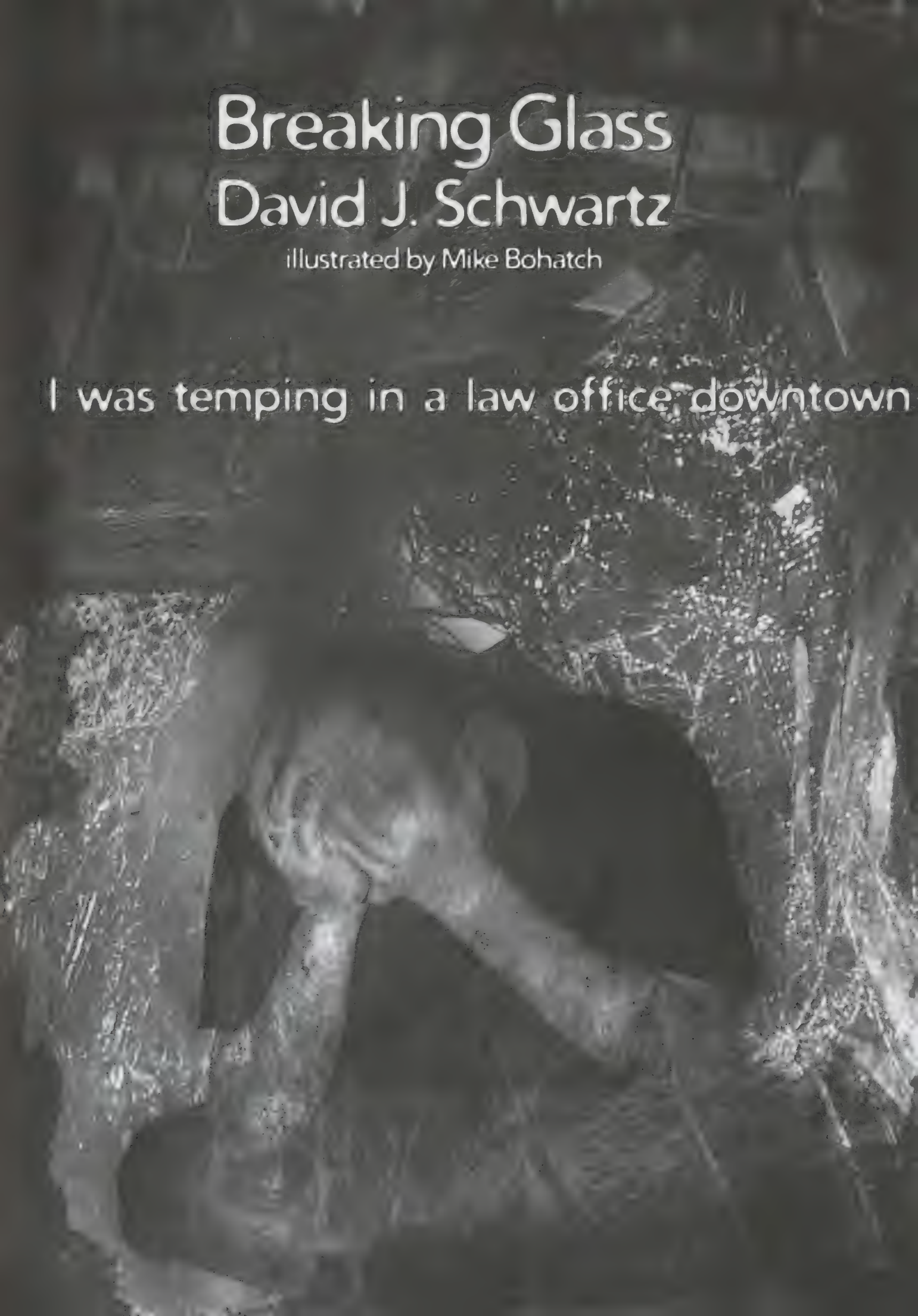
Abarat: Days of Magic, Nights of War
HarperCollins hb, 490pp, £20

Breaking Glass

David J. Schwartz

illustrated by Mike Bohatch



when I found myself

visualizing the conference room window shattering. Has it ever occurred to you that in movies and television glass is always shattering? It doesn't just crack – it explodes, cascades down like jagged rain, skitters across concrete or carpet. It happens in action films, comedies, commercials and anything with a car crash. In cop movies the bad guys are thrown through plate glass windows. In slapstick pictures cars drive through huge panes of glass that are forever being carried across streets by hapless workmen.

I wanted to break the window. I wanted impact and the tinkle of raining fragments, nothing left but sharp stalactites clinging tenuously to a frame. I imagined that it would be satisfyingly cathartic, perhaps even in some way sexual.

I didn't act on those feelings. I was a law-abiding citizen, aside from a little bit of jaywalking and a little bit of jay now and then. But for the rest of that day I daydreamed about shattering the window and stepping calmly through it, while no one in the office did anything about it but stare in amazement.

I'd just moved to Chicago, and I was staying with some friends. Well, one of them was a friend: the other married him, and despite everyone's insistence that she was a wonderful woman, she got on my nerves. The feeling was mutual.

I'd known Victor since college, but we hadn't seen each other in almost ten years, unless you counted the wedding, which I didn't. Sheryl was a rising ad executive, and Victor worked in the city planner's office. They made pretty good money, but what with house payments and Sheryl being six months pregnant they needed a break on their bills, so they rented me the spare bedroom.

It wasn't a very warm arrangement. When I ventured out of my room, say, for a snack or to watch some cable with Victor, Sheryl's displeasure was palpable. After the first couple of weeks I found excuses to get out of the house during the evenings. Victor seemed relieved when I did this – he was probably hearing it from Sheryl about my interrupting their quality time – and after a month I didn't bother making excuses.

There was a stained glass window in their entry that reminded me of Victor. It was above the transom, and it wasn't what you'd call an amazing piece of art. The shapes were simple and geometric, mostly diamonds radiating out from a blocky blue figure constructed of triangles. Sometimes they looked like they were radiating out, but sometimes they looked like they were pelting the figure. At those times it reminded me of how Victor looked when Sheryl started in about something – usually Victor finishing up the baby's room, or taking out the garbage. She was really complaining about me, and not wanting me there, but Sheryl was too polite to say that right out. She took it out on Victor instead, and instead of dishing it back Victor went rigid and he didn't speak. I got the feeling that if Sheryl said one more word she'd be sweeping him up off the hardwood.

So I got out of there as often as I could. I wasn't making enough money to hit the bars, and I worked too late to make the matinees, so I took a lot of walks. I was familiarizing myself with the neighborhood, and the city in general. I was looking for a place of my own, but even the best rents, when I started factoring in utilities, would have strained my anything-but-dependable income.

The night after my revelation I took a walk around the neighborhood and realized that most of the ground floors in the city had a large window in the front. Some were sectioned, and those didn't appeal to me much – it wouldn't be as satisfying to have to shatter every pane, or as efficient. Some were narrow or had stained glass inserts, and I dismissed them as too likely to resist breakage. Some shops had steel gates over their windows to discourage exactly the sort of behavior I was contemplating. But there were other windows, wide and whole, the blue light of television shining from behind their blinds, which seemed likely targets. I scanned the curbs for projectiles large enough to shatter a picture window. It had to be a picture window. No screens. I checked the front doors, too, for alarm stickers. The last thing I wanted was to be caught.

The next Monday I was in a different office high in one of the downtown high-rise buildings. The front of the office had a beautiful wide window, and I was distracted all day, envisioning it falling to pieces.

After work I went to the library and did some reading about glass. I found out something interesting: glass is neither solid nor liquid. It's made up of molecules in a disordered arrangement with cohesion enough to maintain mechanical rigidity. As best I understand it that means glass exists in a sort of limbo. There's a matrix in which the molecules are trapped, but within that structure they aren't entirely static – they can move around a bit, in other words. That's why in some old windows you see a downward flow – that's the molecules responding to gravity over time. At least, that's how I understand it.

Perhaps that's why we're all so fascinated with breaking glass. It's sort of an aberration, this weird substance. It's transparent but you can't pass through it. It's hard, but it's fragile. It raises questions, and people are always afraid of questions.

When I first called Victor to tell him I was moving to Chicago he asked me why. I knew he would ask, of course, and I knew I had to answer, but it was embarrassing. My wife had thrown me out of the house. And Victor, after expressing his very possibly genuine shock and dismay, asked the question again. Why? She hadn't told me why, precisely, but I had an idea. I was certain that as far as she was concerned it was entirely my fault, and I could have listed a dozen contributing factors, but I didn't. If I remember correctly, I told Victor that there were some things we needed to work out, which was a crock of shit. There was nothing to work out. It was over.

Don't think that just because she ended things that I began having these vandalistic urges. It wasn't that simple. That's how things work in stories written by literature professors, who don't know how real people live, or why they do things. My life isn't one of those stories. I can't help that my marriage ended. And like I said, it has nothing to do with what happened.

One night Sheryl went out with some friends, so I stayed in with Victor to watch the NBA playoffs. I don't normally enjoy basketball that much, and I don't think Victor did either, but we ordered pizza and had some beers and rehashed all the stupid things we did back in college. Thinking about it now makes me feel old, but at the moment it felt good. It felt like reconnecting.

It ended the moment Sheryl walked in. She sat next to Victor and asked him about his day, and it was like a partition had dropped down between them and me. I was an outsider, a voyeur. I watched the game for a little while longer, feeling a mounting need to see someone shatter a backboard. But it didn't happen, so I grabbed my jacket and went for a walk.

I broke my first window that night. It was a ten-by-four at the front of a gentrified duplex not far from Victor and Sheryl's house. I'd eyed it in my walks many times, and even seen the couple that lived there once. They were young – mid-twenties, probably – good-looking, and obviously making good money. They'd smiled at me and said "Hi" as they passed through their security gate.

If I hadn't been a little drunk, and if I'd planned the first one like I did the others, I'd never have chosen that place. There was certain to be an alarm system, maybe even a security camera. But I hadn't planned it. I'd taken to carrying a half-brick that I'd found at a construction site. I'd wrapped it in an old dishrag to keep it free of fingerprints, and I kept it in my jacket pocket during those walks, just to get used to the weight. That night I was gripping it so hard my hand was sweating. I pulled my hand out to dry it on my jeans, but the brick came with it, and before I knew it I had launched it at the window.

It didn't work like I had hoped. Only a small section of the window broke, and it didn't come tumbling down in an avalanche of fragments. It made a hell of a noise, though, and so did the alarm.

I ran like hell down an alley on the other side of the street, then several blocks west and north, then took off my jacket and started walking. I thought I heard sirens at one point, but I wasn't sure. I saw a couple of joggers and a woman walking her dog, but no one gave me a second look, and no one stopped me. When I got to the house Victor and Sheryl had gone to bed, and I realized I'd gotten away with it.

My wife – not 'ex-', not yet – was always on my case to get organized and find a steady job. She told me I was lazy and I needed to have a plan. She'd have been proud if she'd seen how I approached my campaign of vandalism.

My nightly walks became reconnaissance missions. I narrowed potential targets based on accessibility, the possibility of witnesses and the difficulty of making my getaway. My preferred sites were on side streets, with a garden containing loose bricks or stones nearby. Once I settled on a target, I started casing another neighborhood. I never struck two targets less than eight blocks apart.

I envisioned the city as an organism, and myself as a parasite. I was taking something I needed from the organism – the feeling I got from breaking glass. The first one had left me wanting more. I thought I would stop when plate glass splintered as if explosive charges had been planted invisibly on its surface, when the people who lived inside looked out and saw me standing there, just standing, not running. And they would just watch as I walked away, and know there was nothing they could do, that calling the police would just confirm their own impotence.

A successful parasite doesn't do enough damage to the organism that's sustaining it to really hurt it, or to attract the attention of its immune system. The first isn't something I was particularly worried about. I wasn't going for quantity, just quality. The immune system – in other words, the police – worried me more.

So I randomized my attacks to make them appear unconnected. I bought gloves and black sweatpants and sweatshirts, but I bought them at stores all over the city and the suburbs, never more than one at a time, always with cash. It was two weeks after breaking the first window that I started my campaign in earnest.

Another thing I learned when I went to the library is that plate glass is made by pressing raw glass continuously between double rollers while it's being heated. In other words, it's constantly under pressure, until it becomes smooth and is ready to be cooled.

I was still working during this time. I'd been temping for years, and I'd become fairly numb to the frustrations of being treated like a twelve-year-old by people who couldn't spell 'intersection', but the job still got to me at times. At one job I typed up a few hundred legal descriptions of lots for a sewer project, which bolstered my theory that the world runs on bullshit. Bullshit is our second language. We speak it in job interviews, courtrooms and confessionals, to our families, our friends and our lovers.

The only time I felt honest was when I was breaking windows. I'd been wrong about the shattering being sexual. It was cathartic, yes, but it was something else as well. Something transcendent. With each window I took a step closer to something divine. It wasn't political – of course it was, in a way, but there was more to it. I was liberating something, not just myself, and not just the molecules trapped in that rigid structure.

If you want to know the truth, I felt like John the Baptist, clearing the way for the coming of Christ. It sounds like a delusion of grandeur, I know. But when I thought about it I didn't feel like a great person. Mostly I felt a terrible awe and dread for the thing which was coming. Even so, I don't think I really believed in this idea of the divine until the first night the acolytes showed up.

It was a hot night, and my black clothes were soaked with sweat as soon as I put them on. The target was a 1950s-era house on the near north side, with a bay window that had overruled my better judgment the first moment I saw it. It was on a side street just off Ashland, and I knew from the first that there was too much traffic and not enough places to run. But the window was beautiful, at least six feet wide and five high. It might be the canvas on which I could paint my picture of perfect destruction.

I had an odd feeling as I dressed for the job, as if the others had just been dress rehearsals, and this was opening night. As I slipped down the sidewalk towards the spot where I'd secreted a paving stone, I had the impression that there were many eyes on me, as if I were on stage. I fought down my paranoia of hidden cameras and did the job.

It wasn't perfect, but it was good, the best one yet. The entire right side of the window broke, collapsing in towards the drawn blinds, some pieces trickling out over the tiny garden in front of the house. In the silence that followed I took a deep breath and turned to run.

It was then that I realized there were a half-dozen people standing in the street behind me. They were all watching me, but their faces bore no expressions of shock or anger. They all wore black, and all held bricks or stones or baseballs.

I think I would have tried to speak, to ask something, but whatever I might have tried to say would have been drowned out by the sirens. They were close, but I couldn't tell where. I had a moment of panic, but then one of the black-clad vandals pointed to a nearby alley. Then the group of them scattered

and ran.

I took the alley, and near the end of it I peeled off the black clothes, dumped them in a garbage barrel and jogged out into the street in my running clothes. Just a typical city dwelling professional out for an evening jog. That was my cover story, but I never had to use it. I don't know if the police picked up any of my audience members that night. There was nothing about it in the newspaper, or the TV news. That was the idea, after all. Just a broken window, no connection to anything else, no pattern. No reason that anyone besides the homeowners should notice.

So how had they known I was going to be there?

get out of the house when I was just getting out of bed and knowing that he would work ten or eleven hours because at some time between our fathers' generation and ours the forty-hour work week had become a sign of laziness – when I looked at him I saw that stained glass man, hard but brittle, unable to bend. I wondered if a man of glass would realize he was trapped, or if the fact that he was able to shift around a bit in the matrix would fool him into thinking he was free. The thought depressed me.

Instead of going to work I scouted potential targets. There was a crescendo building in my nightly work, and I felt an urgency to find my showstopper, my *pièce de résistance*.

When I arrived at Victor and Sheryl's house one night a week later there was a man waiting to serve me with divorce papers. After he had gone Victor tried to cheer me up, but there was no point in it. I was long past caring.

I had stopped going to work. After the acolytes showed up it had seemed obvious that I didn't need to keep going. I had enough money to pay Victor and Sheryl for another month of rent. I wasn't sure what would happen after that, but I felt certain that it was already decided.

I still left the house at the same time in the morning, to keep up appearances, but any stress or urgency I'd been carrying was gone. When I looked at Victor, scrambling to

Something told me that I would only find it deep in the heart of downtown, in the part of the city where it would be most difficult to escape, and so I concentrated my search on the Loop. I wandered the streets with the other commuters quick-stepping their way from train stops to cubicles, dodging traffic and racing lights. Sometimes I thought I recognized faces, faces I had seen on darkened streets, witnessing my work. My eyes met theirs, and I searched for recognition – but in the daylight their eyes were too guarded, and there was nothing to see.

The acolytes appeared at every job, and every time there were more of them. I never saw a sign of them until after the deed

was done, but always there was the feeling of being watched, of performing some ritual act. It was a ceremony of summoning, and every pane that shattered was the footfall of something out of Yeats or Lovecraft or some other gloomy literary prophet. Every night, after I'd faced my black-clad congregation and then fled back to my bedroom sanctuary, I broke out in a cold sweat and told myself that the next night I would stay home and watch a sitcom. I had dark dreams that I never remembered, but which made me afraid to go to sleep. But there was never a question of stopping. I knew I was committed. The doubts were just the sort of thing that made good gospel.

There was no consistency about the people who showed up at the jobs, no trend of age or race or gender. Some nights I would think that there were hardly any women, but the next night every other face would be female. I didn't try to understand or predict. They were always there before me, but they never showed themselves until afterwards. I would put a lawn gnome through a window on an abandoned one-way and turn around to find a hundred dark silhouettes arrayed behind me. When the cops showed – and they did, but not so often as you might expect – they didn't know whom to chase. One night they arrested a sixty-four-year-old grandmother for vandalism. She pled guilty.

What we think of as reality is just something most of us agree on. We agree that things work the way they do, even when we don't think they should. We shrug our shoulders and tell each other that's how it is, as if we don't have the power to change it. We do, of course, but change is scary for a reason. You can't just make new rules; first you have to get rid of the old ones, and in the meantime there are no rules at all. There's never been a revolution in which someone didn't lose everything.

The city was dying, or at least that's how it seemed to me. I saw a different reality than most of the people darting along the bottoms of all those shiny skyscrapers. The city covered its age with prosthetics while the concrete buckled in the summer heat. Something was stirring beneath its skin, something that might be wonderful and might be terrible. And to tell the truth, I didn't care which. The only thing I was afraid of was that I would play my role, and it would come, and nothing would change. I didn't think I would be able to stand being a false prophet.

Every day I went downtown and walked along the river, looking up at the buildings disappearing into the haze. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I thought I'd know it when I found it. I'd stopped all my other activities, knowing instinctively that it would build anticipation for my work, that the next job would be my masterpiece, that my journeyman days would soon end.

There's a lot of glass in downtown Chicago, and that was the problem. I was only one man, and I couldn't find a single pane in the city whose destruction would express all the things I wanted to say, would call forth the thing which was going to change everything. There was no one object in the city that could bear all that meaning. The systematic enslavement of humanity wasn't centralized – it was endemic. It was everywhere. I had so many options that I couldn't settle on one. Days passed, and then weeks. I kept looking, but I'd begun to understand that I wasn't going to find anything. I didn't need to prepare a place; I just needed to prepare myself.

Standing here now I can't tell you that I'm not afraid. I can't say that this is where I expected to find myself. I don't know why it's me here, about to usher in this great and terrifying new age.

I can be more objective now about some things. Like Sheryl and Victor. I can't say that it wasn't resentment talking there, that the fact of my own marriage falling apart didn't color my perception of theirs. They don't have the perfect marriage, but they love each other. Maybe with me gone, with the baby there, maybe they'll be happy.

I guess I was wrong about one thing, about my marriage having nothing to do with this. If my wife hadn't thrown me out I wouldn't be here tonight, wouldn't be in the city at all. But it could be the chain goes back further than that – it could be that meeting my wife in college was only preparation for this, that choosing that college was a step towards this place, this night.

That scares me. I'm not going to back out now. It's too late for that. But it scares me.

There was hardly a light in a single window as I left the house tonight, barely a car on the streets. I had the train to myself. Eight million people in the metro area, and it felt like I was the only one who wasn't gone for a long weekend. Maybe they all know what's coming. Maybe the ones who aren't coming to watch are hunkered down in the dark, waiting for the storm to pass.

Sheryl and Victor are visiting her folks in Kansas. I hope they stay for a while. I sympathize with Sheryl more now – I understand what it's like to want to prepare a place for a child.

Before I left the house tonight I stood for a while looking at that stained glass man over the front door. I've come around in my interpretation of it. I think he's radiating light, casting it out over everything around him. It sounds glorious, but the thing is, light can hurt. It blinds, and it brightens the corners, revealing things that are better left hidden. Change has to come; I've accepted that. But there's always a price, and even when someone's willing to pay it, it still costs.

So tonight I walk down to where bridges connect the glass towers, to where the river reflects the faint stars and the brighter lights of the buildings like a mirror. I face the river and I picture it cracking, sheets becoming ribbons, ribbons striking concrete and becoming shards, shards crumbling to sand and dust and dirt. And over the dirt – what? What will they build after this city is gone? What will come after, what new canyons of concrete and steel will it demand, this creature which has answered my call?

I raise my hand as if to hurl something at the river, to shatter its borrowed images with ripples, but I have brought nothing tonight, no brick or stone. My heart pounding, I turn.

There are hundreds of them, lined up along the bridges and the boulevards, on either side of the river. Against their mass the skyscrapers seem to slouch, to lean in on themselves. I am exhilarated as well as terrified. Tomorrow morning will not be a return to the working week. It will be something new and dangerous. I am sorry I will not be there to see it.

There is an unspoken signal, and they raise their bricks and their stones. They have come prepared. They are my army. In moments they will shatter this city a pane at a time. But first there must be a sacrifice.

I open my arms and close my eyes. I am my own curtain call, my final and greatest piece of work. I know already that when I break, it will be spectacular, that the fault lines I have worn into myself will create a spectacle of flying splinters, and that in that destruction something will be given birth, something will rise.

I am the man of glass.

David's fiction has appeared in many magazines, and the wonderfully titled 'The Ichthyomancer Writes His Friend with an Account of the Yeti's Birthday' received an honourable mention in the most recent edition of *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*. He lives in Chicago.

JAPAN'S DARK LANTERNS

THE SHADOWS BENEATH THE RISING SUN

JOHN PAUL CATTON

Tarantino's *Kill Bill Volume 1* was a great stew of influences with the heat turned up too high, but one tasty morsel in that pot was the iconic status of the Japanese schoolgirl's uniform. We'll all remember the character Go-Go Yubari (Chiaki Kuriyama), and her lethal morning-star on a chain that nearly made mincemeat out of Uma Thurman.

The inspiration for the character of Go-Go goes back a long way. The most obvious candidate is the *Sukeban Deka* manga that inspired a TV series and a trilogy of films in the mid-80s. The heroine, a secret agent working undercover as a delinquent high school girl, wielded a vicious-looking steel yo-yo to render criminals unconscious. Before that was the 1981 *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* – in which a high-school girl inherits her late father's Yakuza gang and takes up firearms in a turf war. The title is certainly no joke; at the film's climax the teenage kingpin, played by Hiroko Yakushimaru, guns down a rival gang in slow-motion, wearing a sailor-suit uniform and carrying (you guessed it) a machine gun.

Just what is it with the Japanese and their school uniforms? As a British expatriate living in Japan, I am regularly asked about "those pervy vending machines." You've probably heard of them: the ones that sell used schoolgirls' knickers. This is not an urban legend, they did exist, but a crackdown by the Mayor of Tokyo got rid of most of them. Now a brisk trade is being done on the Internet – through *netto furima* (online flea markets). Not only knickers, either; some die-hard perverts will pay any sum for teenage paraphernalia – uniforms, recorders, school yearbooks, even used toothbrushes.

Although school uniforms are a proven magnet for weirdos, recently the biggest admirers have been the schoolgirls themselves. Teenagers have suddenly decided that uniforms are 'cool', and fashion magazines across the nation have touted the new-found pride in wearing them. "They know they are under a spotlight," explained Yasuko Nakamura, a marketing consultant. "They cherish their three years in high school and want others to know (they are students)."

Think of it! Conformity – it's the new rebellion! That horrible sucking sound is the sound of post-modernism disappearing up its own *o-shiri*!

And then there's the phenomenon of Costume-play, generally known as Cosplay. The exponents of Cosplay (mostly female) dress up as anime characters and hang out at comic shops and comic conventions – posing for the hordes of amateur photographers (mostly male) who follow them around.

The high-tech retail area of Akihabara in central Tokyo has seen an explosion of Cosplay cafes. Here, the waitresses dress as 19th-Century European maids, serving their (mostly male) customers with old-fashioned politeness. The concept arises from the best-selling manga *Emma* by Kaoru Mori, a tale of forbidden love set in Victorian Britain. The recent steampunk saga *Steamboy* from Katsuhiro Otomo, the author of *Akira*, probably shunted the trend further along too. Considering that Akihabara is the stronghold of *otaku* (high-tech nerds) there's a pretty obvious undercurrent to all this. "For male *otaku*, maids are somewhere between two-dimensional anime characters and three-dimensional real girls," says Ikuko Kosahara, a spokeswoman for one of the cafes. "I think it's preferable for them as they haven't had any chances to make friends with real girls and don't know how to treat them."

"Most of our customers are in their 20s and 30s," says a clerk at an Akihabara comic store. "A lot of them appear to be ordinary white-collar workers. One of the most popular items we sell has been unpainted female figurines, which sell for between 5,000 to 8,000 yen (£25–40). The customers paint the figurines themselves. One that's life-size will cost about 100,000 yen (£500). These come with options, like school uniforms or ballet tights, and even wigs. It's rare to hear anyone grumbling over the high prices."

Cosplay, maid cafes and highly realistic figurines of school girls . . . the harmless expression of . . . what? In the UK, youths expressed their personal liberty through modes of dress, from the days of the Rockers, the Mods, the Punks and the New Romantics. It satisfied the deep need to be identified with some kind of group – in this case, a type of music. With Cosplay the girls are identifying themselves with animated fictional characters, usually weak and submissive, in an art-form created and controlled by men.

Hmmm.

Just what is it with the Japanese and their school uniforms? As a British expatriate living in Japan, I am regularly asked about "those pervy vending machines." You've probably heard of them: the ones that sell used schoolgirls' knickers. This is not an urban legend, they did exist

With all this dressing-up going on, it's starting to get confusing. If the Cosplay girls are just acting out a role, then are the schoolgirls walking around in sailor-suit blouses, blue-pleated skirts, white socks and penny loafers, also just acting out a role?

And what about the salarymen and Office Ladies in their uniforms of white collar shirts and blouses? Where does the play-acting end and real life take over?

Let's backtrack for a minute to school uniforms. Where did their obvious fetishistic nature come from? History tells us that Japan introduced Western-style school uniforms in the Meiji Period (the late 19th Century) as part of its modernization program. The *gakuran* design (uniform for boys) is based on cadets from the pre-WW1 Prussian Army, while the girls *sera-fuku* is taken from the British Royal navy uniform first modeled by the Prince of Wales in 1846.

So why are the boys wearing Prussian style military uniforms 125 years after Prussia has disappeared? Why are the girls wearing clothes designed by Victorian-era militarists? This writer can see only two possible answers:

a) Nobody can be bothered to change them.

b) There has been a conscious effort to keep them as they are.

Either way, the result's the same: the Ministry of Education is effectively bankrolling the pornography industry.

Somewhere south of Memphis, Tennessee, in a torrid, insect-ridden land slashed by paths to nowhere, I found kindred spirits. How our crossroads surfaced out of the sticky night is a mystery of the jungle, not to be known by the traveler packed in among the objects of his existence.

It was late and the weather still clung to much of the South, according to my radio. I had turned off the station's staticky voice in favor of my best *un*-Southern music on tape when my aching eyes abandoned their final attempts to remain open and I almost died in a ditch in a place with no name. I continued squeezing the brake after motion ceased, and the diner's sign shone as brightly as the numbers on my digital dashboard clock.

Open All Night.

Coffee was the only cure for 01:44, so I carefully eased back off the lip of the ditch and drove along the shoulder into a parking lot guarded by two lamps. I sat there for a couple minutes seeing reflections of my life in the mobile aluminum building and its lit but empty windows. The sense of vacancy was somehow enhanced by the violent cloud of bugs surrounding the lamp that stood between my car and the door, creatures so large I could feel their iridescent scissors wings on my face even before I opened the screechy door of my hatchback.

As my foot met concrete still hot enough to burn through the soles of my Jesus sandals, I saw an aproned woman appear over a slab of counter, face wondering what might be stirring out in the vapor. Her buzzing soldiers did a reconnaissance of me as I approached the entrance to her domain, each of them as long as my middle finger and tearing holes in and out of the aether. I knew I would scream if one attached itself to my clothes, scream like the wind must have screamed when it conceived the traveler that I was.

They withdrew as I reached the door, as if they knew their limits, hovering on their opalescent blades, daring me to come out again. They would have to wait on that potentiality, however, for as I grasped the doorknob an instinct or a reflection made me glance back at the car, where a fiery glint of metal occurred behind the rear window. *Shit*, I thought, knowing the source was too valuable, particularly in these parts, to be left for the eyes of any night owls who might flutter by.

The insects were perturbed by my audacity, providing a hissing escort back to my car. As I opened the hatch to rearrange my belongings so that the curvaceous golden treasure was out of view, I lamented that the pawn shop hadn't had a case to go with it. My fear of damaging the six-hundred-dollar used sax dissolved as I realized at least two of the mutant insects had infiltrated the car. *Shit* became *fuck* as I tried to shoo the monsters out, but my gesticulations only made them probe deeper into the heap of my possessions, until they had disappeared from view altogether.

Slamming the hatch, I beat my way through the rest of their numbers to the diner's door. The coffee seemed an afterthought now, albeit a necessary one, as I knew I could never leave this place without finding both the infiltrators, even if it meant removing every single object from the car. If one of them brandished its scissors while I was driving down the highway at fifty miles per hour, there was going to be an accident.

The interior of Open All Night was hotter than the caldron outside, with grease for vapor, ketchup for ripened road kill, a blues blend for the night's insectile symphonics. Somewhere out of the joint's apocalyptic core seeped the smell of coffee, probably on the breath of the waitress/cook as I took a stool and she lavished her versatility upon me.

"W' can I git fer ya, suguh? I'm a mind to cook up a batch o' my famous pancakes if y've a taste fer the finer pleasures."

"I'll just have coffee, thanks."

"Wuz 'at yew squealin' rubbuh outside?"

I looked at the eighties medley of her hair and makeup, the pleasant neglect around her jaws and hips, the animal blood on her threadbare apron, and I confessed that yes, it was me.

"Tryin' t' woo the ladies, wuz ya?" she said, winking. She sauntered over to a pot that might have been yesterday's brew. "So where ya'll headed?"

Ya'll? "*I* am headed to Florida."

"I been t' Florda a time or two. Once on spring break."

"Yeah," I said, aware of the tenderness around my eyes. "Me too."

"Sweet ner? Cream?"

"A little sugar, I guess."

"W' type o' car ya sportin'?" Her back was to me as she spooned the sugar into the mug, but there was no confusing the question for other than one of manhood.

I looked out the window behind me and saw that the lamp brought only the slick metallic surface of my ride to view. "I'm sportin' a rusted-out, fifteen-year-old Honda Civic with bad brakes and worse tires."

I could see her shoulders tense as she stirred.

"At least during the week," I added.

"Hmm?" she intimated as she turned, mug in hand.

"During the week I drive that hunk of metal. On the weekend I cruise in my Camaro."

She hugged her suddenly dominating breasts as she leaned on the counter. "Really?"

"Yeah," I said. And tasted black bitter hell in a cup.

"What year?"

I opened a packet of cream and poured it into the blackness. "You know, I'm not sure. I think the back half of it may be vintage."

"The back half?"

"Would you mind zapping this a minute?" I said, handing her my coffee.

She clearly wasn't decided about me, but took my mug anyway. "Zap?"

"Nuke?"

"Oh." As she melted back to the core.

I wasn't displeased to get out of there.

I walked out into the swarm of flashing knives with the expectation of gutting my car of its load. Instead, a whole other circumstance presented itself to me. Leaning against the side of my hatchback were two women somewhere around my own age, which hovered at the quarter century mark. One of them was black, slim, and out of place in her sleek, sleeveless party dress. The other was white and heavy in Mama Cass-like Bohemian attire, with a swagger that was evident even though she was idle.

As I stopped a few feet from the bumper, I had the strangest feeling that, wherever they had come from, whatever currents had landed them at my car, they were mine now. It made no sense, indeed smacked of all the witlessness that I carry around with me like a drivers license. "Is there some reason you are leaning on my car?"

The slender girl, adjusting her form-fitting tube, spoke up. "Your tag says you're from Tennessee."

"So it does."

"Would you be comin' or goin'?" she said. "We ask because we're on our way to Memphis and it would be mighty convenient if you could give us a ride. We'd be willin' to foot the gas bill, of course."

"Sorry, I left Memphis behind hours ago."

"That's too bad," said the big girl. "We saw your saxophone and were sure we'd found a like soul."

I glanced at the back of the car, where I knew I had at least

sugar cream pie

darren speegle

illustrations by mike bohatch

put the instrument out of the lamplight. They must have been inspecting the wreckage of my life pretty damn closely.

"Why?" I said.

"Mm?" they said as one.

"Why does the sax make me a like soul?"

The white girl said, "We're blues musicians, Milan and me. Milan sings and plays the bass and rhythm guitar. Myself – they call me Honey – I sing and work percussions. It just so happens we're lookin' for a saxophonist for our band."

"The saxophone's not mine. That is, I didn't buy it for myself."

"Who then?" said Milan.

"Not that it's any of your business, but a girlfriend."

"What happened to her?" Honey said.

"Happened? Did I say something happened?"

As I stood there demanding more from them than the knowing, sympathetic expressions they presented, my personal swarm of bugs formed a funnel around my incandescence. Unexpectedly Milan lurched towards me, hissing through her pearly teeth, causing me to jump, scattering the insectile whirlwind into the darkness. *Fuck* became *Holy God* as I searched for my heart, suspecting that if given half a chance she would take it from me and use it in a voodoo ritual. But as she relaxed again, grinning at me, the moment might never have been.

"So what's your destination?" she said.

"Florida." I stepped cautiously around to the driver's door.

"It really is a shame," said Honey. "I'm bettin' you can play that sax better than you think you can."

As I opened the door, which seemed like a terribly predictable motion, it hit me that I hadn't taken care of the bugs that had stowed away. I sighed and said in a calm voice, "Listen, you two, I wish you the best in Memphis, but I've got other shit to deal with. Okay?"

"Is it the bugs?" said Milan.

I stared at her. "How do you know about that?"

"I saw one between the keys of your saxophone. Looked like a friend o' the blues, if you ask me. I used to know somebody who'd put her cigarette inside the key guard like that while playin'."

Couldn't tell if it was the heat or her words that wouldn't let any part of me but my lips move. "Tonya did that."

They looked at me under finely arched brows.

"I watched Tonya play on two different stages. Both times she did exactly that."

"Sounds like there's a lot of energy surroundin' that instrument," said Honey.

"A lot of Tonya," said Milan.

I hung there on my door, in all my witless magnificence, and said, "Tonya never even played that saxophone. I bought it for her birthday, but we fought. I left with the sax and all my belongings."

"Will you take us to Memphis?"

My head seemed to shake without a signal from my brain. "You're welcome to ride with me to Florida if you like. You're more likely to find a gig down there where there's less competition, anyway."

"They don't love the blues down there like they do in Memphis."

"I met Tonya in a blues club on spring break in Panama City Beach, Florida."

"Come to Memphis."

"Florida."

"Will you be our saxophonist?"

"I know how to drive. I know the way to Florida. I don't know anything about the saxophone."

"Except your girl played," said Honey.

Except my girl played.

God had she. It might have been the one deciding factor in my giving up my world for her. Milan, in the passenger seat, conjured the history out of me as I drove, clueless as to which direction we had decided on, my eyes swelling over empty glands.

My friends and I had been tossing back shooters that Ladies' Night in the Boogie Woogie Blues Bar when the band's saxophonist issued a challenge to anyone in the audience who thought they could outplay him. Tonya answered the call. She and I had already made eye contact, in my dreams, and I was completely mesmerized by the possibility of the moment as she appeared on stage cuddling her wine cooler and daring to face the horn blower at his game. She stole the show as she stuck her cigarette in the key guard and played as if she were breathing her blood through the instrument. I fell in love with her at that moment, though I wouldn't see her play the sax again until a year later, when a similar scenario – this time by personal invitation – played itself out in the Barking Dog Café on Beale Street. Her father and instructor had made a meager living there before surrendering his ghost to lung cancer.

I gave up my junior college basketball scholarship for her, walking on at Memphis University, where I was the last man cut from the team. We lived in a trailer at the edge of Bluesville while she continued her schooling and I mourned in the grocery bags that earned me my half of the rent. We squabbled over money and tiptoed around my bitterness until the last, one stormy evening when I packed everything, including the birthday present she would never see (and for which I had been saving for six months), and started for my family home of Springfield, Illinois.

Mirroring the turmoil of our relationship, the storm that

seemed to carry me out of Tennessee would not die, eventually depositing me at a motel when I might otherwise have driven all night. It was on the next morning, by way of the motel TV, that I discovered a tornado had hit our mobile home community, destroying several homes and at last count, fourteen individuals. When the camera panned over the ruin where our trailer had stood, I knew instinctively that she was one of them. A strange torpor fell over me and I didn't move from my seat on the bed until the front desk called to remind me it was past checkout time. As I reached the interstate ramps, I chose south instead of north, not out of any sense of duty or responsibility – I had little sense of anything at the time – but rather a compulsion to look a last time on the place where Tonya and I, in another lifetime, might have made it good. Arriving on the scene of devastation five hours later, I sat in my car at a distance and watched emergency personnel pick

through the wreckage. When Tonya's parents appeared on the scene, I left there and found an Econo Lodge, intending to face it all in the morning.

"Morning still hasn't come," I told my passengers. "Sunrise on the beach seemed far better."

Milan put her hand on my hand, and I heard music through her skin. I heard Memphis, somewhere in our path, backwards or forwards. I asked her to sing for me and she did in a low, sexy, bluesy voice, with Honey chiming in from the backseat in a restrained alto. The night's liquid depths seeped in and I told my passengers we had to stop at the next motel. I was too tired. I expected an argument – our destination was only a couple hours away, wasn't it? – but they seemed to understand about the weariness. The weariness that went all the way down to the bones.

At three in the morning the lights of a roadside inn can look like anyplace, but I thought I recognized the neon curve of a saxophone as we crossed the humidity to the door.

They were lips as they had tasted that first time outside the Boogie Woogie Blues Bar, where we had gone to get fresh air, Tonya and me. Somehow, in spite of our drunkenness, our mutual desire, we managed to find the softest kisses amid the hint of salt (the memory of it always blends with the scent of the Mississippi River) on the air. Soft, soulful kisses.

As I opened my eyes to Milan, who lay on top of me, I saw that her deeply brown irises had a golden tint, as if they captured the sunrise that seemed so far away. Behind us I heard the merest sound and tilted my head back to find Honey standing just behind me, whispering into my – Tonya's – saxophone, which we must have brought inside with us. As Milan's kisses fell on my neck and chest, I told Honey to play. But she shook her head and presented the instrument to me, an upside down magical artifact unearthed by the heat, enduring even in this room suddenly so full of smoke and voices and music blessed music like none ever known.

I heard the strike of a match.

Sizzling in space there for a second.

And then Tonya's face retreating among the cheering unrecognizable others at the foot of the stage as I pulled on the cigarette once, exhaling, twice, exhaling deliriously, before sticking it between the keys of the beautiful sophisticated thing in my hand and playing on.

My fingers had experienced these landscapes before, only they weren't my fingers. My soul had breathed like this before, only it wasn't my soul. I glanced to my right and saw Milan spidering along the bass strings with her expert fingers, looked behind me and found Honey working away on the drums, eyes closed, the memorabilia of former blues artists hanging on the wall behind her. I turned back to see Tonya pointing at me from among the faces at the foot of the stage, rolling her shoulders and shaking her hips and digging me so bad. I pushed my music down on top of her and she stole my smoke out of my sax and the silvery dream captured us both in its threads. I withdrew, teasingly, and the silken, elastic twine fell with me into the company of my fellow players.

Milan didn't look like herself as I threw my sound in with hers, her eyes widening in a fierceness that I had witnessed once before, at some distant time, over the hood of a car. The rhythm she so masterfully commanded faltered as the digits of her hands lost their way and her limbs grew long and thin and glossy and her mandibles began chopping at the air between us. Behind me the percussions grew sharper and more insistent, and I turned to find Honey's jaws gnashing at my very neck. I dropped the saxophone as I fell into the crowd, Tonya's hands catching me, then working to unsnarl me.

The noise of the audience dissolved into the hollowness in my ears, the tenderness around my eyes. The air spat with dawn as the green-blue of the sea appeared ahead of the headlights, a lazy sun approaching from the east. I heard a buzz and nearly instructed the brake accordingly, but the sound came from outside the car as a lamp along the street surrendered to the new day.

I glanced from the empty place beside me to the rear of the car, where I thought I saw, through the useless clutter of my possessions, the soft golden kisses of Tonya's birthday present on the window.

Darren has recently had two collections of short stories published, in quick succession, both of which have been reviewed by Peter Tennant in TTA, last issue and this. His stories cover a range of genres, and he has recently sold a story to *Crimewave*.

SCRIPT GENERATOR by PHILIPPE VASSET

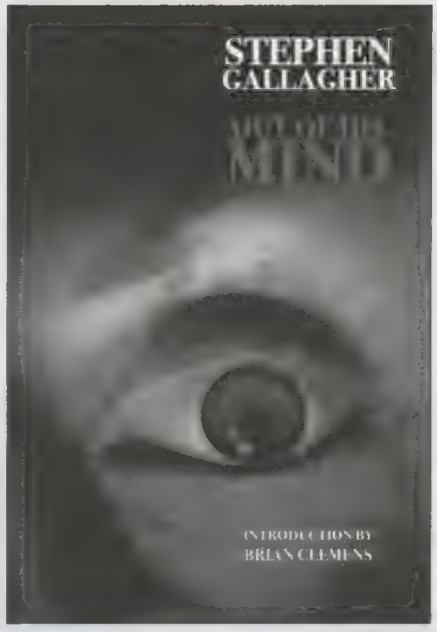
Serpent's Tail pb, 412pp, £8.99 www.serpentstail.com

Philippe Vasset's book has two strands. One is the précis of a new computer programme, the script generator of the title, which will allow the publishing industry to do away with its perennial problem child, the author. Couched in business speak, this strand consists of options for stock plots, characters, settings etc, with further suggestions on how books should be marketed, the use of celebrity and commercial tie-ins, a wealth of indispensable detail for the publishing mogul wannabe. Intercut with this is the account of a man who discovers the existence of script generator and sets out to track it down, with the intention of making money through his knowledge of the publishing world's best kept secret.

A.L. Kennedy describes the book as 'A darkly entertaining and disturbingly prescient novel', but while the novel may very well be prescient (we can already see evidence of the publishing industry adopting many of the tactics it describes, such as the curse of the celebrity author) I didn't find it all that entertaining. *Script Generator* is, at heart, nothing more than an overextended joke, designed to appeal to those for whom irony is everything, the irony being that the 'quest' part of the book, which is as badly written, poorly plotted, dull and flavourless as it gets, is supposedly produced using the programme itself, a fact only the comatose wouldn't twig to, so I make no apology for the plot spoiler. On the prescient side of things, the manual part of the text is bleakly convincing in its way, highlighting the commercial ethos of the publishing world and the alienation of true creativity as a result, and on that level it works rather well, providing a much needed reality enema for those who thought getting published and read was simply a matter of good writing, whatever that means. The big punch line, that the computer couldn't produce anything better than mediocrity, would perhaps be more amusing if you didn't have to actually read the mediocrity itself. While *Script Generator* contains some interesting and minatory ideas they're not put to much use and the end result of it all is something of a mixed blessing.

OUT OF HIS MIND by STEPHEN GALLAGHER

PS Publishing hb, 412pp, £35 www.pspublishing.co.uk



Stephen Gallagher is not a writer you automatically associate with the short form, though his stories are often the highlight of any magazine or anthology in which they appear. With an introduction by Brian Clemens and a lengthy afterword by the author giving us fascinating background information on each story, where they were previously published and how they came to be written, as well as his own views on the occult, this book brings together the cream of Gallagher's short work over the past couple of decades, eighteen short stories and three novelettes. Though it's always dangerous to generalise, especially where a writer of Gallagher's ability is concerned, it seems to me that most of these stories come under one of two headings, ghosts and children.

On the latter count, 'Magpie' is one of the most powerful and credible accounts of childhood bullying I have ever read, with a chilling last line that hints at what the young are capable of when under pressure. 'Little Angels' takes a leaf out of Saki's book of unpleasant things to inflict poetic 'justice' on some truly unpleasant children, while novelette 'The Drain' has three boys from the wrong side of the tracks chasing a chimera of wealth and a way out of their squalid lives, plans which come fatally unstuck, a compelling piece of storytelling and with characterisation that forces the reader to identify with the plight of these lost children, bringing to mind work along similar lines by the likes of Stephen King. Modus Operandi' is a neat little piece about seeing the world through a child's eyes, as a young boy obstinately declines to live down to his parents' expectations. The child in 'Fancy That!' is only hinted at, as a man buys an exotic rat as a pet to give his loved one for Christmas, until the wonderful Dahlesque twist at the end, while in 'O, Virginia', an eerie yet also deliciously funny story that delights in illiteracy and childhood misunderstanding of the adult world, two boys have a memorable encounter with a travelling fairground Freak Show. 'Poisoned' is a small gem, with children playing on contaminated ground in the main body of the story only to reveal its real narrative thrust with a last page that snatches the rug out from under the reader's feet.

For ghost stories we have 'The Visitors' Book', a subtle, disturbing piece that hints at much more than is conveyed by the words on the page, each event capable of very different interpretations as a family spend time in rented accommodation for their summer break. In 'The Horn' three men marooned in a storm are attacked by a vengeful spirit, a story in which Gallagher's gift for scene setting is particularly apparent, with the hostile, snow covered landscape every bit as threatening as the supernatural menace it contains and the interaction between the men racking the tension up a notch higher. 'The Jigsaw Girl' has a forgotten figure from a man's past come back to haunt him, a story with an intriguing plot device at its centre and a wonderfully ironic denouement, while in the sad and evocative 'Life Line' a man at the end of his tether with grief discovers a phone line that will put him in contact with the dead. 'Like Shadows in the Dark' has two people trying to escape from Communist Russia, and in an Angel of Mons style resolution one of them is saved by the intervention of the spirit world, another story with a superbly rendered winter landscape and steadily mounting sense of menace. Quiet humour and tension collide in 'God's Bright Little Engine' as a woman tenant receiving unwanted help from the building's handyman finds that some people really are dedicated to their work. While still worth reading, 'Casey, Where He Lies' is one of the few pieces that disappoint, the premise not as original or successfully exploited as it perhaps might have been, with a music industry wannabe trying to impress a girl and losing his life in the attempt, albeit carrying on in a curiously truncated form. Finally 'In Gethsemene' is the best thing here, a beautifully

CASE NOTES

BOOK REVIEWS

PETER TENNANT

realised novelette in which a spirit medium travels the country in concert with a stage magician who has fallen on hard times and vowed to expose him as a fraud. The idea is a fascinating one, with the setting of rundown concert halls and cheap boarding houses perfectly conveyed, and a genuine compassion for those who seek the solace of communication from beyond the grave, while at its heart is the ideological rivalry between the two men, forcing one of them to confront the truth about himself and what he is willing to do for the sake of being in the right. This story is the perfect end to a multi-faceted and long overdue collection from a writer who's learnt his craft thoroughly. Kudos to PS Publishing for making it happen.

DIGGING UP DONALD by STEVEN PIRIE
Immanion Press hb, 333pp, £17.99 www.immanionpress.wox.org

All is not well in the town of Mudcaster. Vicar Herbert Likewise has been replaced by a demonic entity and with the help of henchman Mr Dodds sets about organising Armageddon, or something very like it. Central to the resistance are the Richards family, with the ancient Grandmother who sits on the brow of a hill standing guard over a sacred site of power, which the town council would like to transform with a bit of tree planting, while the Mother formulates plans to avert disaster and the Father acts as her trusty helpmate. The most important people in all this though are the Richards children. Maureen is married but her hopes of pregnancy have been scotched by demons, a situation she can't reverse despite a flair for erotic improvisation that makes the Kama Sutra look like something for novices, while schoolboy Robert is the Chosen One, destined to play a pivotal role in the conflict that is to come and thus very much on the radar of Reverend Likewise and his cohorts, especially as his hormones are on the march and he's taken a fancy to the Reverend's daughter Joan. Desperate times require desperate measures, and so the Mother calls for the digging up of Donald, the family's time capsule, which contains a number of articles of occult power, including the Book of Family Business, while the Grandmother orders the Richards clan to assemble in its entirety, both living and dead. On another plane, where he has an actual existence, Donald overlooks the proceedings, as the stage is set for the latest battle between the forces of good and evil.

The plot is something of a labyrinthine sprawl and there's much more to it than conveyed by my exercise in précis. Though, with the benefit of hindsight, the pieces fit together quite well there's also a feeling of contrivance about much of what happens, with the reasons for some of the events not at all clear, such as why the relatives have to be dug up in the first place as they play only a small part in the final showdown. Plot is very much a secondary concern here, gonzo in extremis and serving no intrinsic purpose except to provide a framework within which Pirie can exercise his considerable comic talent. This is seen most obviously in the wealth of wonderful characters that abound within the pages of the book, such as the matter of fact Father with his phlegmatic approach to daily chores and the fear inspiring Mother with her combination of battle-axe spirit and heart of gold, or the Grandmother, breathtakingly indomitable and defiant in her splendid isolation. There are similar delights to be found in the interplay between Reverend Likewise and the evil Mr Dodds, the romantic escapades of Maureen and her lucky sod of a husband, and even in the antics of such secondary characters as the policemen and teachers, diligently clinging on to their set ways of doing things in the teeth of disaster. Pirie knows how to give us people who are funny but never silly, characters with whom we can identify, and the key to his success is in the dialogue, which occasionally lapses into a sameness but more often is rich with warmth and humour. Elsewhere his invention never seems to flag as Robert, who is very much the Candide or Michael Valentine Smith of the story, and the other members of the Richards family are dragged into all sorts of adventures, taken to Death's Gate and Hell itself, travelling back in time and journeying all round the world in search of the remains of deceased family members, the latter the pretext for some of the book's funniest scenes, as we meet such over the top characters as Uncle Norman, who does a passable impression of Prometheus chained to a rock only with starlings, the prudish Aunt Maude who was cremated and ended up sharing an urn with a man, and Cousin Hilderbrand, the carnivorous brain, a brood that is both typically English and eccentric enough to make the Addams gang seem the epitome of middle class tedium by comparison. All told this is a delightful and thoroughly entertaining read. Pirie's book is a shot in the arm of a jaded genre and if there's any justice he will be welcomed with open chequebooks by the devotees of comic fantasy.

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LEGACY OF BLOOD by JIM HARPER

Headpress pb, 192pp, £9.99 www.headpress.com

Subtitled *A Comprehensive Guide to Slasher Movies*, the heart of this book consists of over 130 reviews of films, some with quite respectable reputations and others that have gone straight to video. Harper is a reviewer after my own heart. His enthusiasm can't be doubted and he approaches each film from the perspective of a fan boy rather than any more serious critical stance, but he never holds back when a movie deserves trashing and his comments can be entirely apposite. His critical faculties may at times seem skewed, as with his fondness for the god awful *Valentine*, which I personally never regarded as anything more than a flimsy pretext to put Denise Richards in a bikini, and he does rather dwell on nudity and gore to the neglect of other qualities, but overall he's a pretty canny commentator, and his views, always leavened with humour and a genuine feel for the subject matter, are worth hearing for anyone interested in this subgenre. In addition the book is packed full of those vitals titbits of trivia that are a film nerd's guilty pleasure, such as that while *Scream* was the most successful slasher film ever the spoof *Scary Movie* outstripped it by a considerable margin at the box office, or that *Silent Night, Deadly Night* had people picketing cinemas in protest at the portrayal of Santa as a serial killer. Other features include a listing of so called video nasties and stars who got their first break in slasher films (Tom Hanks, would you believe?).

Where the book falls down is in its analysis of this subgenre. Harper gives us a series of introductory essays tracing the development of the slasher movie,

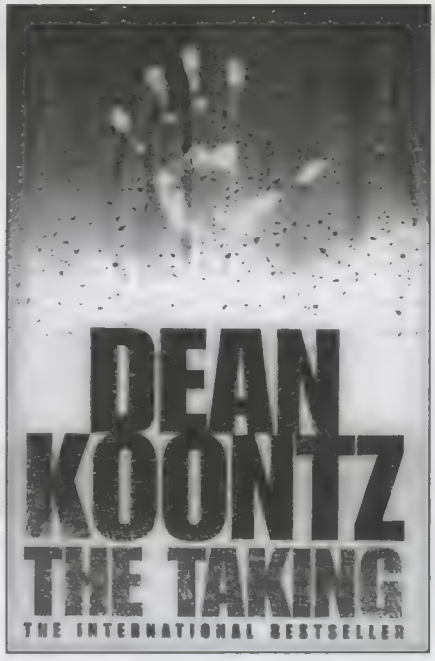
its most significant financial and critical successes, and identifying the genre's defining characteristics, such as the inevitable female survivor (given the label 'Final Girl' by academic Carol Clover), the clay feet of authority figures and the premium put on virtue, illustrating each trait with numerous examples and naming exceptions to the rule. Where he draws the line is at suggesting the reasons for these characteristics, and similarly he makes no real attempt at addressing the slasher movie's continuing appeal, so the reader is left with the feeling that there's still a significant work to be written on the subject. This is not it, but it will do to be going on with.

THE TAKING by DEAN KOONTZ

HarperCollins hb, 338pp, £17.99 www.harpercollins.co.uk

One night it starts to rain all over the world. Hard. And the rain smells of semen. Something unnatural and very bad is going down. While some await the long expected End of Days with a prayer in their hearts, others fear an alien invasion and prepare to do what they can by way of resistance. Molly and Neil Sloan travel down to the town of Black Lake, but instead of joining its defenders they undertake a mission of their own. With society, if not reality itself, completely broken down they witness terrors and wonders; alien fungi, dead men walking, strange new life forms and giant ships that pass by in the air overhead. All of these are an irrelevance though; their job, guided by preternaturally aware dogs, is to save as many of the town's abandoned children as they can from the few human monsters taking advantage of the anarchy, among them Molly's own father, a murderous psychopath escaped from prison in the general chaos. They have been given a purpose, even though they can only conjecture as to what it is and try to find a reason for all that happens.

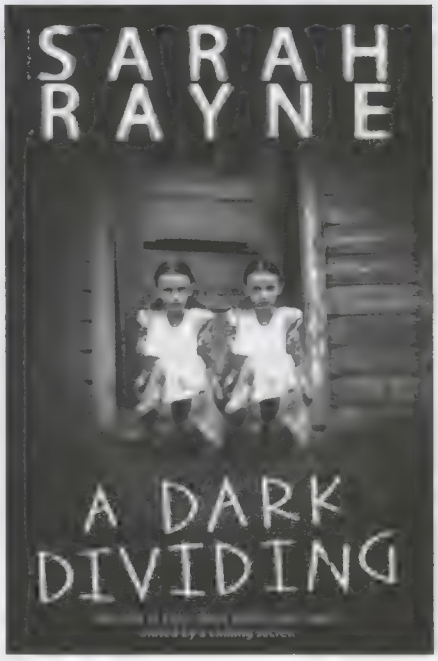
A couple of years ago I watched *Phantoms*, a film based on a Koontz book in which a small town is cut off from the rest of the world and becomes a place where natural laws are suspended so that absolutely anything can take place. This is pretty much the same thing, only done on a global scale and with a different pretext.



Koontz's prose is annoyingly facile at times, with a line in metaphor that hints at a thwarted career with Hallmark Cards and an occasionally intrusive, not to say slightly condescending, authorial voice. Some of the characters are annoying too, such as Molly, whose brand of compassion and understanding, except in the case of those she judges unworthy, I found too close to preachy and self-righteous for comfort. The narrative borders on sentimentality much of the time and, having tantalised us with the lure of a Science Fictional explanation for what is going down, takes a leaf out of the M. Night Shyamalan book of sloppy philosophising to hedge its bets with a consolation prize for the Bible belt. Of course, as with *Phantoms*, the rationale behind it all is something of a side issue, the plot simply acting as an excuse for Koontz to throw as much horror stuff at the page as he can, like the literary equivalent of sampling (here's a snatch of Cthulhu weirdness and there's a snippet of Poe to flavour, but pass the Hodgson on the right hand side). On the most basic level it's a fast paced narrative by an author who seems to have missed out on the idea of long paragraphs, opting instead for a more cinematic mode of storytelling, with bizarre imagery and weird shit happening on almost every single page. And yet, to provide my own surprise ending, despite all the flaws I enjoyed it rather more than not, and if you're looking for a light, undemanding read to pass a few hours on a rainy day then you could do far worse than this. Of course, if the rain smells a bit funny and doesn't stop . . .

A DARK DIVIDING by SARAH RAYNE

Simon & Schuster pb, 420pp, £10.99 www.simonsays.co.uk



This novel bears many of the trappings of Gothic melodrama and a decade or so back would undoubtedly have been marketed as Horror, but nowadays it's parcelled up and sent out into the world as a Crime novel, with regard to which, if I'm allowed a moment of anthropomorphism, the Horror genre is no doubt breathing a quiet sigh of relief at a lucky escape.

The plot, summarised as succinctly and spoiler free as I can manage, concerns two sets of Siamese twins born in different centuries but inextricably linked. The mother of the first pair, Charlotte Quinton, diligently records the details of her life and the fate of her daughters in a journal, starting in the year 1899. Eighty years later these events are mirrored in the life of Mel, who gives birth to Sonia and Simone. These conjoined twins are successfully separated, but for Mel this is just the start of her troubles, with a train of events set in motion that will put her and daughter Simone, when grown to adulthood, on collision course with a madwoman. Central to both stories is Mortmain House in the Welsh Marches, in Charlotte's day a workhouse with a truly sinister reputation but now a ruin where the misery of the past is etched deep in the walls and retains the power to reach out and hurt those living in the present, the venue for a climactic final confrontation.

What takes place in the pages of this book is contrived beyond almost any hope of credibility, a shortcoming that is only accentuated by lack of any supernatural rationale for events. Along the way we get more than enough coincidences to underwrite the careers of at least half a dozen gypsy fortune tellers, with the ineptitude of officialdom, unlikely family connections and chance discoveries galore all co-opted to move the plot along. But while almost wholly risible, the plotting is not the worst thing about the book. That honour goes to the characterisation. There are five different viewpoint characters (six if you count Charlotte's novelist lover, whose book is an essential McGuffin) but four of them sound almost exactly the same, which is particularly unfortunate as one of these is a man and another a woman from the year 1899. The reader opening the book at random will probably have no idea who is speaking, with the narrative jumping all over the place and whole trains of events left on the back boiler for lengthy stretches. Most problematic is Charlotte Quinton, who sounds like a very modern Millie indeed, and her adventures as chronicled in the journal have such depth, including verbatim reports of conversation, it's hard to credit them as anything other than fiction and to wonder, with all this scribbling, when she has time to actually live the events she describes. The only voice that stands out from the crowd is that of Roz, who is your bargain basement psycho by way of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*. At first an almost sympathetic figure, she's soon acting completely out of character and, at least initially, with little credible motivation for the way she behaves, resorting to ever more over the top gestures and adopting an increasingly shrill tone as the story progresses (subtext – she's barking). In case you hadn't guessed, I thoroughly disliked this book, so it will probably sell by the truckload.

A DIRGE FOR THE TEMPORAL by DARREN SPEEGLE

Raw Dog Screaming Press pb, 208pp, $14.95 www.rawdogscreaming.com

This second collection from Darren Speegle contains over thirty stories, most of them very short and with a greater emphasis on the prose style than in *Gothic Wine*, which I reviewed in the last TTA, bringing to mind the lavish use of language in the work of writers such as Dunsany and Clark Ashton Smith, though with a distinctive sense of modernity and forward looking. The narrative constructs often seem somewhat more tenuous and less focused, so that while there is still very much here to enjoy when looked at as a whole the collection is not as consistently satisfying as its predecessor and may well be more of an acquired taste.

Some of the stories fall squarely in the Science Fiction ball park, though Speegle has his own unique approach to the genre, one that you won't find much represented in the pages of *Analog* and *Asimov's*, with obliqueness and the fantastic an essential part of the mix. These were the stories I found least to my taste, as with 'The Whole Circus', which portrays an Orlando of the future where everything has been sacrificed to entertainment, a disappointing story that seems to wander aimlessly on the route to nowhere, or the slight and, to me anyway, confusing 'The Ego Game', which sets out to question the nature of identity through the mechanism of a man encountering an android version of himself. Sometimes though Speegle does pull it off, as with the magical future venue depicted in 'Shades of New Geneva', a story that hints at mythic archetypes as its hero attempts to retrieve something lost there by a woman long ago. In 'Rupture Zone', a compelling story with plenty of action and a cinematic appeal, a man is pursued across some blighted future terrain into an area where otherworldly creatures have broken through into our own reality.

But it's the Horror elements that make the latter story succeed, and it's in his dealings with this genre that Speegle excels. Yes, he does have a tendency, like many of his peers, on occasion to produce work that is slight and/or derivative, as for example with 'Triangle', which reprises a plot already used by Fredric Brown and Ray Bradbury, among others, adding nothing new to the mix, while 'The Curse of Lianderin' is your bog standard haunted castle story, though here Speegle redeems the banality of the material with a delicious twist at the end. However, such pieces are against the general run of play. At his best Speegle offers a unique voice and a startling imagination, and the stories in *A Dirge for the Temporal* show him at his best far more than not.

The depiction of madness is one of Speegle's strong suits, as with the protagonist of 'Indulgence', who dresses like a clown in honour of his dead

father, the story hinting at something truly sinister lurking back of the flow of words. In 'Illusions of Amber' a killer visiting a small town finds that there are much worse things than he, a story strong on atmosphere and slightly reminiscent of Jackson's *The Lottery* as tables are deftly turned, while in 'Merging Tableaux' a man returns to the scene of an injustice many years ago only to get caught up in a recreation of the crime, an intriguing piece and evocatively written. One of the highlights of the collection, 'The Call of Morzine' sees a plague visited on a small town by a possibly demonic visitor, with the boy who witnesses this himself transformed forever, a story with insight into human nature and a love of urban legends. In 'Dance Therapeutic' a homicide detective with a special gift realises that the killer he seeks is his own father, and each death tableau has a personal message for him, a darkly satisfying story of aberrant psychology with some gruesome scenes of carnage. The stylish 'Mousse' has a male killer meeting his female opposite number, a run of the mill case of like calling to like elevated out of the ordinary by the dazzling prose. In the excellent 'Eyes of Hazel, Kiss the Earth' a dealer in unwanted children is taught a grim lesson when Satanists ask for one of his charges, while 'A Nasty Set of Circumstances' is a telling snapshot of a relationship grounded in S&M practises.

Sexuality on the edge is a recurring theme, as with the brief but powerful 'Humpty Dumpty Had a Great Fall', in which a couple's sex games take a bizarre turn while 'The Smell of Sex' chronicles an encounter between a tormented woman with enough sexual hang ups to see her psychiatrist set up for life and a lycanthrope of some sort, deftly delineating character and effect. 'Junkyard Fetish' is another star turn, giving us a man with sexual leanings that are unusual to say the least, and making it all totally believable and sickly compelling.

There's humour here too, albeit mainly black, and the occasional diversion into a gentler mood. 'The Day it Rained Apricots' is a delightful fantasy about the rivalry between two bakers while in 'Papa Bo's Big-Ass Barbecue' the rustic backdrop courtesy of *Dukes of Hazzard* gives way to something much more sinister, a story that creates a genuine sense of unease despite being almost wholly predictable in its denouement. In fantasy piece 'The Glass Encrusted Nest' a man discovers an unusual egg, with all hell breaking loose when it hatches to provide a satisfying sting in the tail. For feel good though you can't beat 'A Fixture on River Street', in which tourists in New Orleans have an encounter with a famous jazz musician, a beautifully written and quietly elegiac story with an ending that took me completely by surprise.

While there may have been the occasional piece not quite to my taste, I thoroughly enjoyed most of these stories and Speegle is a writer of vivid prose snapshots that will linger in the mind long after the book is put aside. His work is recommended to connoisseurs of the weird and unusual.

THE EXTREMIST & OTHER TALES OF CONFLICT by PAUL FINCH

Pendragon Press pb, 74pp, £4.99 www.pendragonpress.co.uk

This book consists of five tales on the theme of conflict, three of which were originally published as an impromptu trilogy in *Nasty Piece of Work*, with the addition of an introduction by the author giving the background to the stories.

Title story 'The Extremist' touches on public issues raised by cases such as that of Tony Martin. Its protagonist, a WWII veteran, kills a burglar to save his own life and is let off by a court more lenient than that faced by Martin, but then the dead man's family decide to take matters into their own hands. With his arsenal of WWII weaponry and some tricks courtesy of *Home Alone* old Joe is more than a match for the Culshaw clan and proof of the adage that an Englishman's home is his castle, though in his mind the invaders become muddled with the Japanese enemy of fifty years before. It's a well written story and many readers will get a vicarious thrill out of seeing the bad guys get what's coming to them, but it slightly trivialises Joe's mental state by using it as window dressing and doesn't really address the issues of vigilantism that are implicit in its subject matter.

The other stand-alone story is 'The She-Wolf Shimmered', in which a couple of soldiers at the end of WWII decide to take their own revenge on a high ranking female Nazi prisoner, but are resisted by a conscientious guard. Again the story has a contemporary relevance, but it touches on themes of justice and revenge without really bringing anything new to the table, while the twist ending seems to undercut much of what has gone before.

'We Who Fight Monsters', the first of the three linked stories, is more substantial, with a neo-Nazi group killing off the members of society it regards as sub-human and being rewarded for their actions, until one of their number, like Montag in *Fahrenheit 451* stopping to read one of the books he's meant to burn, confronts a crisis of conscience when he is attracted to a potential victim. The story bears out Nietzsche's dictum about the dangers for those who fight monsters, while its picture of an extremist group and its rationale is certainly put over convincingly, making for an interesting read, one that more adequately addresses real concerns as to the direction society is heading.

'My Day Dying' is even more impressive, with a wounded soldier in a ruined building looking back at his life, and as he reflects the picture that emerges is one of a true monster, Finch providing credible motivation for the way in which the man acted. In many ways Westerner is the antithesis of the protagonist of the previous story, and yet though initially sympathetic he is perhaps a more ruthless killer, someone who murdered to protect himself but then found that he enjoyed it.

'Ordeals Inc' borrows from the Michael Douglas film *The Game*, with a shadowy organisation that offers to empower its customers by enabling them to live out their fantasies, only the customers don't always get what they bargain for, as is the case with Burling, whose desire to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, a hero of the WWI trenches, doesn't quite turn out the way he planned.

This is disappointing compared to what has gone before. The idea of people discovering their boundaries in such a way is intriguing, but the organisation itself doesn't quite convince or seem economically viable, while the final twist almost drags the story down into the land of genre cliché.

This was a worthwhile collection and gives a glimpse of what Finch at his best is capable of, but its let down slightly by a tendency to eschew tackling the issues raised by the stories in favour of taking the easier route, that of the 'surprise' ending.

SUNSET AND SAWDUST by JOE R LANSDALE

Weidenfeld & Nicolson hb, 321pp, £12.99 www.orionbooks.co.uk

Lansdale's latest novel is set in the 1930s east Texas logging community of Camp Rapture, where the beautiful Sunset shoots dead her violent and abusive husband Pete to save her own life. Pete is Camp Rapture's constable and due to a surprisingly understanding, not to say influential, mother in law Sunset ends up wearing his badge, despite popular opinion that this is not a woman's job. With the stalwart Clyde and drifter Hillbilly as her deputies, Sunset endeavours to do the best she can by everybody, but her very first case involves the murder of a whore her husband was involved with, and there are plenty who would like to see the crime pinned on Sunset. As she casts about for the truth Sunset stumbles on a plot going to the heart of Camp Rapture, one that concerns not only local bigwigs but McBride and Two, a brace of psychotic killers on the road to fortune and not caring a whit who they have to bury along the way.

This is Lansdale at the top of his form, delivering a story that is never less than compelling and a thoroughly engaging read from first word to last. East Texas in the 1930s is perfectly evoked, a land which has only just put its outlaw past behind it and where the law is no more effective than the man (or woman) who wears the badge and carries the gun, with a white sheet in every other closet and women all too often regarded as only good for one thing. Lansdale's plot is one that is both predictable in the main while at the same time surprising with some of the twists that it takes, such as the revelation of Hillbilly's true nature and Sunset's having to deal with various romantic complications while enforcing the law. The real joy of the book though is in the rich characterisation, with Sunset herself a proto-feminist, the perfect case of a worm who turns, a woman who's had enough and simply refuses to take any more, Lansdale's quietly elegant prose bringing her dilemma and its resolution to life in a way which totally involves the reader. She is backed up by a cast of first rate characters, from the ordinary Clyde, who provides comic relief, to misfit Bull, a man who is feared but deserving of respect, while in the deadly McBride and mentally damaged Two we are given some truly memorable bad guys to hate. Recommended.

THE ART OF MURDER by JOSÉ CARLOS SOMOZA

Abacus pb, 470pp, £10.99 www.twbg.co.uk

In the year 2006 the world has been irrevocably changed by a new artistic movement known as hyperdramatism, or HD for short, which consists of actual people being transformed into works of art to be displayed in galleries, public places and private houses. Some of the works are worth many millions. Elsewhere we have all the usual trappings of the art world, involving forgeries, reproductions, splinter groups, criminal factions, the use of people as ornaments and decorations, pieces of furniture. Pivotal in the development of HD and its leading exponent is the Dutch artist Bruno Van Tysch, with the wealthy and influential Van Tysch Foundation determined to protect his interests at any cost. Young Clara, like so many others, dreams of being taken by Van Tysch and made into a masterpiece, an ambition that may well be realised when she is asked to undergo the gruelling ordeal that will make her into a canvas worthy of the Maestro. But what Clara doesn't know is that two of Van Tysch's most valuable works have recently been destroyed (murdered, in ordinary terms) and his Foundation faces a crisis like none before. Security chiefs April Wood and Lothar Bosch find themselves thwarted at every turn and reach the conclusion that someone inside the Foundation itself is helping the killer. The only course open to them is to delve back into the life of Van Tysch himself in the hope of figuring out who his enemy is and why he destroyed these particular paintings, but with the new exhibition of thirteen pieces based on the work of Rembrandt set to open shortly time is against them.

The Art of Murder holds a mirror up to society, convincingly extrapolating from present trends and asking vital questions about the role and purpose of art, about pornography, slavery, the artistic impulse . . .

In 2003 Somoza's novel *The Athenian Murders* won the CWA Golden Dagger Award, which may account for the belated English publication of this earlier work. Though perhaps it seemed reasonable at the time of writing, the year 2006 is too soon for the changes in society envisaged by Somoza to take hold, but that is the only false note struck in this otherwise thoroughly convincing and beautifully crafted novel, which operates on several levels. In the foreground is a compelling murder mystery, one that is no less enjoyable for the eventual transparency of its resolution, with meticulously plotted move and counter move, and characters as real as those we meet on the street every day functioning alongside the larger than life luminaries of the art world. The real joy of the work though is in the background to these events, the way in which Somoza delineates the mechanics of using actual people as works of art and then so thoroughly explores the implications of such a practice. Like the very best art, *The Art of Murder* holds a mirror up to society, convincingly extrapolating from present trends and asking vital questions about the role and purpose of art, about pornography, slavery, the artistic impulse and marketing, fetishism and S&M practises, the objectification of people, our concepts of beauty and criminality, the nature of genius. The end result is a superb, multi-layered work of fiction and a book I can't praise enough. Go buy a copy right now and then get one for somebody you love.

illustrated by Bob Libby

story by MELANIE FAZI/translated by BRIAN STABLEFORD

the CAJUN KNOT

The summer stretched itself out like a serpent, all moistness and languor. The air above the housetops seemed clotted; the tension was manifest: the anticipation of a storm that never arrived. It was said in jest that the wind had been stopped at the border, refused permission to take up residence in Alabama. I knew more than one man who would have sold his wife and children for a few drops of rain, in order to sweep away that glutinous torpor. But the sky remained empty, day after day, and hopelessly blue: a uniform, nauseating blue.

It was a difficult time for a pregnant woman. At the height of the spell, during the month of August, I had watched Cora Ellis drag her weary carcase through the streets of the town. A long time – six years at least – had passed since she expended the energy of her previous pregnancy in cleaning the church and helping the neighbours. Juniper had been born in the tobacco field where Cora brought a snack to the older of the Quigley brothers while he worked.

"That one loves the earth so much that she'll never leave it," she had said, laughing, with her newborn in her arms.

She was a solid woman, Cora Ellis. A child of the country brought up in the open air, built to beget an entire dynasty and repopulate the whole state. But at twenty-nine, this infant was to be her last. It was her third pregnancy, perhaps one too many. Soon, it was not only her body that advertised her impending maternity – a belly inflated like a bloated watermelon, the skin stretched like that of a tambourine – but her face too, even her adorable eyes: veritable pecan nuts, which had acquired the dull colour of scorched earth. Her laughter lost its spontaneity, as if the effort of provision were reducing the old Cora to a ruin, cut a little more out of her every day. Now, she resembled a desiccated plant, nourishing her baby with her own sap, making a bulwark of her entire body in order to protect it from the summer.

At the beginning of September, when the laws of gravity had had their way with her health, Cora stopped coming to the village. One morning, I waited in vain for her to arrive in the grocery store, escorted by her two children, with all the grace of a tortoise pregnant with an anvil. Even Jackson and Juniper no longer came to plunder my sweet-jars. The neighbourhood deduced that Cora would only reappear with a baby in her arms and a smile on her lips; tongues wagged happily in anticipation of the news. That's the most widespread pastime hereabouts – the only one that fills your head without emptying your pockets. There were even a few who bet money on the sex of the baby, in order to kill time when the evenings were slow.

And the days went by.

Three weeks had passed when the rumours took a more serious turn, perhaps because Cora's prolonged absence had become a puzzle requiring a solution. As ever, there was no lack of speculation. Some claimed to have seen Eugene Ellis, rifle in hand, spending entire afternoons sitting on the porch of his house. Luther Owens, the cabinet-maker, spoke in hushed tones of an explosion heard in mid-afternoon, as he passed in front of the Ellis house. I'm leaving out the more extravagant rumours – stories of phantoms sighted in the fields behind the house. I remained frankly sceptical when told the story of old Gavin Oakley – already more than a little senile, even when he was sober – who swore that he had encountered Jester, Eugene's dog, when he got back home returning from his usual session with the local boozers (which was his substitute for a social life). According to him, the hound had asked him the time before slinking off without a word of thanks.

I'm not a man to interest myself in the tittle-tattle of idle peasants, but the facts spoke for themselves. It was the absence of the kids from mass that had attracted attention in the first place. Even when he couldn't go himself, Eugene never failed to send his children to the service; it was a point of honour with him. Always in the first row, standing up so straight they might have had broomsticks for spinal columns; always spick and span – Jackson in a white shirt buttoned up to the collar, Juniper in her Sunday best dress, cut from the cloth of one of her mother's old gowns. It's rather bad form to refuse to join the community on a Sunday morning – an hour a week is hardly asking for the moon. Cora had good reason for remaining indoors, and Eugene might well be fully occupied at such a time – but what of the two little Ellises?

And then Jackson had failed to attend his classes for several days after school resumed, without offering any excuses and without a word from his parents. Sometimes, he was still seen accompanying Juniper as far as the gate and going home unhurriedly, to the little house some distance from the town – which immediately demolished the hypothesis that he was playing truant. To be sure, there's nothing very tempting in passing four hours in a stifling classroom, regurgitating multiplication tables by the dozen, but if the desire had overtaken him to go running through the fields with other street-corner kids, Jackson would have acted with discretion, without taking the risk that Eugene would catch wind of it. Eugene, keen to bring up his kids properly, had his own educational principles. An Ellis *never* ducked out. Even if an earthquake were to sweep away the school like a house of cards, an Ellis would still be at his desk. The day when Jackson had reappeared in my shop to buy a Coca-Cola and a comic book, he had avoided my questions by playing particularly dumb – although the fact was that the kid had never been very loquacious. "Must

go back and help my father," was all that I could extract from him. Instead of sitting down by the door to read his comic, as was his habit, Jackson had gone straight home, his booty in his pocket.

The baby had doubtless arrived; that was what I had deduced at first. When another week passed without any news of Cora, though, I was now longer so sure. Eugene would surely have come into the shop eventually, if not for provisions at least to let us know. He adored his children, that one. He would have never let the arrival of the latest addition to his family pass in silence; he was more the sort to shout it from the rooftops before cockcrow, at an hour when honest men were asleep in bed. (Eugene's voice was scarcely more harmonious than a cock's, in my experience – during one memorable drinking session in the fields, to wet the head of the new year, he had sung a serenade to a nearby scarecrow before demanding that it marry him.)

I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't curiosity that pushed me to pay them a visit. Oh, to be sure, I'd have found a good excuse, if the need arose, to justify myself – to verify that all was well, to obtain news of Cora, to let slip a few anodyne remarks about Jackson's absence, that sort of thing. And I was sincere, or nearly. But more than anything else, I wanted to know – that's only human. No one can keep a secret to himself in such a little town. If Eugene was hiding something from us, if he needed our help – who could tell? – it was as well to make the first move while I could still make myself useful.

Some considerable time had passed since I'd last gone out to the Ellis house. Most of the time, it was Cora who came to us, to dispense a little of her good humour like a whiff of fragrance, exchange a few words with my wife and empty the shelves of the shop to fill her larder. By that time, I no longer went to the Ellises unless I received an invitation – a favour that had become increasingly rare. How long had it been since I shared a beer with Eugene, staring at the stars like two cows watching the trains pass by?

The house had been repainted since my last visit – or, to be accurate, the repainting had been started. The rusty mailbox, whose inscription of Eugene D. Ellis would soon be no more than a memory, was perched like a vulture above the recently renewed whiteness of the gate – to which the dust, after two blinks of an eye, was already restaking its claim. But the work remained incomplete, whether from lack of time or shortage of paint it was impossible to tell. The other half of the gate still looked as if it hadn't seen the paintbrush since the time when Eugene's grandfather was in his cradle. Shoots of kudzu had crept to the foot of the fence, ready to take up residence there.

The house's own metamorphosis had been arrested in a similar hybrid state. It was as if a far-reaching project, intended to renew everything – for the birth of the little Ellis, no doubt – had had to be abandoned because of some sudden catastrophe. It was perhaps as well that the wind had deserted Alabama that summer – if not, I wouldn't have given much for that poor excuse for a roof. On a dark night, the light of the hayloft must have been visible, escaping between the dislodged tiles.

Eugene was waiting, sitting on the steps of the porch, his rifle laid across his knees. He got up when he saw me approaching, without taking his eyes off me for a second.

My gaze slid towards the bottle posed unceremoniously beside him, directly in front of Jester's empty kennel. It was three-quarters full of some home made cocktail whose recipe I preferred not to know. The turbid liquid was the same indeterminate colour as the stain on his trousers, shaped like a map of the States. His crumpled clothes didn't seem to be very clean either – as if he slipped on the same ones every morning, without question. His cheeks resembled a badly kept garden, cut by hurried sweeps of a razor – with the result that, for once in his life, he was showing his age.

Eugene had always seemed too young to be Jackson's father. Cora and he had not yet reached their twentieth years when their son was born, and the boy was now ten. Perhaps it was because of his pale complexion and his blond hair, like a Viking – not really the image of a man who toiled beneath the southern sun from dawn to dusk.

When I reached him, Eugene fixed me with the oblique gaze that he had bequeathed to Jackson – as if he were looking at me over the rims of imaginary spectacles. He tightened his grip on the rifle that he was clasping firmly between his grubby fingers. He'd doubtless spent long hours making it shine like some precious silver trinket – the weapon glistened like a bolt of cold lightning. I licked my lips before sketching out – not at all convincingly – the ghost of a smile.

"Hi there, Gene."

It was not until that moment that he seemed to recognise me. He took on the expression of a man who had woken up in the middle of the night in an unfamiliar bedroom. For a moment, I wondered whether he might have been abusing unorthodox substances. Who knows what temptations a man might yield to, left to his own devices?

"Elmo?"

"I thought I might bring you a few provisions. Lucy's made fried bread and rice with beans. There's also the remains of a pumpkin pie, for the children. I suppose Cora isn't in any state to cook for you just now, unless I'm mistaken."

I was waiting for Eugene to grab the helping hand that I was waving under his nose, but he hadn't budged an inch. I wondered if he'd understood a single word I'd said.

"Perhaps I should put them in the kitchen?"

"Wait!" The answer was a little too quick, like a cry from the heart. "I'll put them away myself." Then, by way of apology: "I don't want to wake Cora. Thanks, Elmo . . . "

I gave him the package, which he placed on the steps of the porch one-handed, always keeping the rifle in the other – as if he had a superstitious dread of letting go of it. It was only then that I noticed the odour – or, rather, the absence of odour. Each of the other houses in the neighbourhood had its own distinctive reek, most often the effluvia of frying bacon and eggs, or meat grilled on those barbecues that continued far into the night: the perfume of summer, tenacious and haunting.

The Ellis house emitted none but faded and diffuse odours: dead odours, of hay or tobacco. Any others remained imprisoned by the closed shutters that barred the passage of the sun's rays. Even the half-open door revealed the hostile grille of a fly-screen.

There was the silence as well.

All I could hear was the clicking chains of the swing suspended from the branches of a tree behind the house – Jackson, presumably. The noise of every one of Eugene's gestures was amplified in consequence; the rustling resonated in the emptiness like the crackling of dry twigs under a boot-heel. I had expected to be greeted by the staccato murmur of Eugene's radio. That was what one usually heard first, before even passing through the door. Distant voices stifled by parasitic noises, like clandestine messages thrown out at hazard and picked up in error. Nameless pieces of music, emerging from nowhere, which served as a sonic backcloth to our card-games. Joyful tunes that made Juniper warble when she was a baby. They had even accompanied her first steps; one day, she had wanted to dance to the sound of a violin's melody and had

simply got to her feet.

"I just wondered what had become of the baby. I suppose . . . "

"Not yet," Eugene cut me off. "It's late coming."

"Cora must be finding the long wait wearisome."

"Not as much as me." The remark was made in a single breath, almost a whisper.

Eugene didn't exactly seem overjoyed by the prospect of his impending paternity. Do you know many fathers who talk about the birth of their latest child while tightening their grip on the butts of their rifles? Perhaps the summer had begun to weigh heavily on him, I thought – and on her too. When the heat makes the blood boil in our veins, it is any wonder that minds become unhinged?

"If you've come for news, Elmo, I'm afraid that I've none of importance to give you."

"Actually, I'm just a little anxious for Cora. As we haven't seen you in town lately . . . "

" . . . you're wondering, of course, why I no longer send my boy to school. Is that it, Elmo? Have the others sent you to spy on me?"

I saw Eugene hesitate momentarily, considering different alibis – "I send my kids to school when I want to" (rather suspect); "the farm's afflicted by a virus" (hardly a reason to cut oneself off from the world, especially with a pregnant wife) – before choosing the most neutral option. "I need Jack here to give me a hand, if you must know. He's a great help."

"Repainting the house?"

"Among other things."

He had a damned cheek to reply to me as if the job had been started up again; it obviously hadn't been touched for some time.

Behind him, at the corner of he house, a face appeared that was a little too pale, topped with red hair as fine as his father's. Jackson must have come running after hearing his name pronounced.

He was rather small for his age, and his puppy fat hadn't yet disappeared completely. The dungarees he was wearing were threadbare at the knees and two sizes too big for him – the gift of a neighbour whose son had grown out of them too quickly. Even with the legs turned up and the shoulder straps shortened as far as possible, it was reminiscent of the ancient outfits with which one rigs out scarecrows.

Jackson stepped back a pace on seeing that I had noticed him. He put his hand on Jester's collar to restrain the dog, who only wanted to lick me clean with his long tongue. I winked at the boy, without any response.

"Jackson Ellis," Eugene said, without turning round, "will you please go and play, and let us men talk." His voice was almost calm, without a trace of severity. To talk to his son, Eugene abandoned the brittle tone that he reserved for intruders – a role in which he seemed to have cast me.

Jackson grudgingly obeyed and took himself off, still holding Jester's collar – but not without throwing me one last inquisitive glance. Beside him, the dog seemed so massive that I couldn't tell which of the two was directing the other.

"I suppose Jackson's also helping you with the birds?"

"The birds?"

"I notice that you've fetched out your hunting rifle – that's to scare off the birds and small animals prowling around the fields, isn't it?"

One of the corners of his mouth was raised in a rictus of amusement, so conspicuously that he almost seemed to be winking his eye. Eugene had never been able to produce a symmetrical smile.

"Do you really think I have ammunition to waste on feathered creatures, Elmo? Honestly? I'm expecting a visit, to tell you the truth." There was a moment's silence, then a sentence that had been held up for too long sprang forth like a bullet: precise, murderous, definitive. "I'm waiting for the son of a bitch who's made a kid with Cora."

I couldn't tell whether Eugene was embarrassed or relieved to have spat out that particular morsel. He was never in a mood to share confidences, though – unless he was drunk, with the night air for a witness.

So that was the reason for the rifle, and the hours spent mounting guard on the porch. Eugene was simply furious – as furious as only a jealous husband knows how to be. Above all else, he had always had absolute trust in his wife.

"What's that supposed to mean, Gene?"

"You understood me well enough. A father can recognise his children, can't he? I tell you this one isn't mine."

"I thought it wasn't born yet?"

"Don't push me, Elmo, okay? Don't make me say any more than I already have. Sure, it isn't born – but I've good reason to believe that it isn't mine. Well, I'm waiting for the other dirty bastard to come back to see his son. He'll come back in the end. I want to see the sort of man that could father that kind of . . . "

"Has Cora . . . ?"

"No, she's never said a word. No need. I know what I'm talking about."

Jackson came back, insinuating himself at his father's side with all the discretion of a field-mouse. I hadn't noticed his presence until he pulled at his father's sleeve to attract his attention.

"Papa," he ventured, timidly.

"What, Jack?"

"I think it will soon be time."

From his pocket, Jackson took an imposing watch that Eugene had entrusted to him, and deposited it in his father's open palm. He swayed from one leg to the other, with a slightly embarrassed air, gazing at me earnestly. He was careful to keep a respectful distance between us.

"You're right, Jack. I'd begun to lose track of time. Listen Elmo, thanks for the provisions and the visit – truly, from the bottom of my heart – but I've a lot to do today, as you'll understand . . . "

"Gene!"

Cora's voice reached us through the half-open door, from the shuttered room. I saw Eugene stiffen in front of me and exchange an indecipherable glance with Jackson.

"You have to go now, Elmo."

"You're sure that you don't need my help?"

"It's a family matter. We can straighten it out perfectly well between ourselves, thanks."

"It's here, Gene! It's coming!"

The voice became more urgent, impatient and slightly anxious at the same time: that of a woman who has reached the stage of having contractions and is beginning to anticipate the pain that will precede the delivery. Eugene leapt towards the door, every sense alert, before turning towards me one last time.

"Listen to me good, Elmo – I want you to know that whatever happens, it's not my fault. Go away, now."

A moment later, he disappeared into the suffocating darkness of the house. I found myself alone again with his son, who seemed anything but delighted by my presence.

With his fists deeply thrust into the pockets of his dungarees, Jackson distractedly shifted pebbles with the tips of his bare toes, while installing himself on the step in order to force me to be on my way. But Eugene had only had to order me to go to make it impossible for me to turn around.

I simply wanted to know what was going on – and to be there when Cora needed me. I couldn't leave a woman on the point of childbirth in the hands of a man alone, even though it would be her husband.

My gaze flickered over the layer of dust that covered the swinging armchair set in the corner of the porch, where Cora spent the summer nights. I had seen her nursing Juniper there, six years ago. I had seen her burst out laughing on Eugene's knees while they rocked back and forth together in unstable equilibrium. I had expected that she would pass the last hours of her pregnancy there, in the shelter of the shady porch, outside the stifling walls of the house.

I don't know which came first – the explosion or the gasp of surprise that hadn't time to develop into a cry. I only remember clearing the steps with a single bound, pushing Jackson back as he tugged at my sleeve and begged me not to go in.

And suddenly, I was planted in front of the door of the master bedroom, incapable of crossing the threshold.

I hadn't had the time to see very much before Eugene slammed the door in my face.

Cora's emaciated face, emptied of all substance, clotted by stupor. Her lips scarcely thicker than a leaf of parchment.

The third red eye in the dead centre of her forehead.

The brown hair strewn across the patchwork quilt, soiled with the same sticky substance that flooded her face.

The arms of a desiccated mummy, folded in a reflexive gesture of self-protection. The inflated belly, fit to burst.

Lower down – much lower down – between the legs opened to let the infant emerge, a dark form, moving slowly and sinuously.

I can't be certain now of what I thought I'd seen. It had all happened so quickly. At the time, however, I was convinced. The door had closed on the image of one serpent preceding a second, with other heads emerging in their train. About ten, at a conservative estimate.

But I could have been mistaken.

The noises went on and on within the secrecy of the bedroom. Even passing through the wooden door, some were still clear enough to stimulate the imagination. Including the most anodyne: the demented cadence of Eugene's footsteps on the floorboards; the dull impact of a body falling back on a mattress.

Images rose up spontaneously before my eyes, like a collage with neither head not tail, but already too precise. I didn't want to hear those sucking noises, like boots plunging in and out of mud. I didn't want those visions of broken bones, of flesh ravaged by a blade.

All the noises had the dirty red colour of Cora's blood.

The house spat me out again upon the porch, into the open air. My eyelids clamped themselves shut, like shutters in a storm, to banish the white glare of the sun – our eyes lose the memory of light as soon as they're deprived of it. I would have sold my grocery store to the devil for a breath of wind, let alone a few drops of rain.

Without quite understanding how, I found myself stuck fast to the porch steps, convinced that I was about to cough up my guts and perish where I lay – but my stomach was more solidly entrenched than I thought.

When Eugene had come out in his turn, I heard Jackson turn the key to lock the bedroom door. Eugene was holding a linen sack in his clenched fist, sealed by several knots. It was soiled with dark marks, as if he had wiped his hands on it.

On reflection, the traces on his trousers might not all have been wine-stains.

Eugene held his burden at arm's length in order to avoid any contact with the contents, whose nature I preferred not to know. When he had thrown it into the grass, I thought I saw movement under the linen.

The other hand held the rifle by the barrel, with the butt extended towards the ground. I saw Eugene lift it up towards the sky in order to bring it down with all his strength on the linen sack, and then again and again – ten times in all. The mighty blows were delivered in a blind fury. He finished the job with the heel of his boot.

I watched him as one watches a madman discharge his nervous energy on the first thing that comes to hand, unsure as to whether I ought to intervene. Having run out of breath, Eugene finished up by sending his punch-bag flying with a savage kick, before signalling to his son to pick it up.

"In the well, Jack. You know the way."

Jackson obeyed, with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man marching to the scaffold. He advanced slowly, placing one foot exactly in front of the other with the extreme concentration of which only children are capable. Jester went after him, tongue scraping along the ground like an anteater's.

Jackson chased the dog away with a brusque gesture, only to see him return a moment later with the alacrity of a boomerang, sticking fast to his coat-tails.

Beside me, Eugene had slumped down on the steps again, at the exact spot where he had mounted guard for six weeks. All trace of anger had vanished from his face; nothing remained but lassitude. *I warned you, didn't I?* his eyes seemed to be saying.

"Don't look at me like a criminal. Do you think I like spending every day like this? Telling stories to my little girl, at night. *Your mummy's tired, June – you'll see her tomorrow . . .* "

He lowered his eyes towards his blood-encrusted fingers. He wiped them clean on the wood of the porch, mechanically.

"I truly had no choice, you know. It was to spare her all the rest. One way or another, she would have been dead before June came back from school. That was settled on the first day."

Then Eugene stared at me again over his invisible spectacle-rims, his lips twisted into a sick smile. Beneath his bushy eyebrows, his eyes shone like those of a man who was preparing to tell a good joke.

"Go ahead, say it – I'm crazy. You find that funny, eh? A miserable degenerate who shoots his wife like a dog. Say it, if it's what you think. But I'll tell you a funny thing, Elmo. Come back tomorrow morning, if you dare, and you'll find Cora still living. In a terrible state, but always alive. That amazes you, eh? Do you have the guts to show up here tomorrow morning? Are you man enough?"

"Stop it, Gene. What do you want?"

The sound of my voice sobered him up like a smack in the face or a bucketful of water poured over his head.

"You're dying to tell me your version of the facts, aren't you? Well, go ahead."

Eugene passed the palm of his left hand over the stubble on his cheeks, mechanically. He gave every indication of never having thought that he might have to justify Cora's murder before a truly attentive audience.

"It's . . . I don't really know where to begin . . . "

"You said *that was settled on the first day*. Do you want to start from there?"

With a piteous little giggle, he pointed his thumb at the door behind him. "It's been right in front of your eyes since you arrived, and you still don't understand . . . "

I have to admit, frankly, that it was not the kind of decoration that my neighbours stuck on their doors to welcome visitors.

It was curious that I hadn't seen it sooner, even fully occupied as I was by Eugene: the tree that had hidden the forest close at hand.

I knew what it was – in theory, at least, since it was the first I had seen with my own eyes. A *vèvè*: a voodoo spell, all curlicues and crosses, inscribed in chalk on the wooden door by a beginner's hand. The contours of some of the symbols were blurred, as if they had been redesigned several times before the chalk was reduced to a stump.

The design was set in the centre of a circular device reminiscent of the image of a serpent devouring its tail. A bulging sachet, sealed by a cord – doubtless a mojo amulet – was nailed in the middle of the largest cross.

Suddenly, I had an absurd vision of Eugene in the process of cutting the throat of a black cockerel over a tin-plated bucket held out at arm's-length by Jackson. Only moonlight was lacking to complete the tableau.

"It's a loop," Eugene explained. "A little souvenir of three years spent in Louisiana, with Cora and Jack. The guy who showed it to me was a Cajun – a lowlife who knew New Orleans like the back of his hand. The kind of creep who tried to lay his hands on my wife as soon as my back was turned. Who knew what dirty business he was mixed up in, until the day he disappeared into the wilderness? For no apparent reason, he showed me some pretty tricks after nightfall – really weird things, like you'd never believe. But if anyone had told me that I'd be doing them one day under my own roof . . . "

"What do you mean, a *loop*?"

"I mean that within these four walls, the same day has repeated itself for six weeks. And it will go on and on for as long as I don't untie the knot – until that other son of a bitch comes back for his kid."

Have you ever seen the desire for revenge lurking in a man's gaze? It's a sad sight: something fugitive, elusive, like the reflection of the moon at the bottom of a well. It's there, before our very eyes, but always out of reach. It was at such moments that Eugene seemed most distant of all – and the most alone, busy digging himself a hole into which he might sink.

"I must say that Jack's been a great help. A brave lad, that – a chip off the old block. I didn't want him to know at first, you know, but he figured it out for himself. He's a little devil, my Jack. It's only Juniper that hasn't caught on. And I swear to you that she'll never know what happens here while she's at school – not as long as I'm alive. She stays in the loop after nightfall, of course – within the walls. Jackson and me, we see that she leaves the house when the moment comes. Pour June, it's always the same day, one morning after another."

That was when the sun began to set. It cast a threadlike shadow at Eugene's feet, armed with an unnaturally extended rifle. When I saw that it had already swallowed up the toes of my boots, I couldn't help stepping back. On a dog-day like that, I must have been the only man in the state to flee the shade.

"It's like the story of the hydra, you see – the creature with all the serpent's heads. I cut one of them off, and the following day it's already regrown, and I have to begin all over again. I can show you, if you don't believe me. You know the well, close to the railway track? That's where I chuck them away, mostly . . . "

(The following day, I went to the place to check out his story. I stayed there for a long time, gazing at the wellhead, besieged by honeysuckle – but I dared not go too close.)

". . . the rest, I buried. There was one I left on the rails to wait for the train. I even tried to feed them to the dog, but that brute Jester didn't want to know."

He had instinctively resumed his sentinel pose, with his bottle of liquor standing in for a guard-dog. Legs apart and firmly anchored to the ground, back very straight, rifle laid across his knees. The sun and the shadows wrangled over the burnished skin of his shoulders, which brought out the dirty whiteness of his smock.

The world was effacing itself anew; there was no more shuttered house, no more leaden sun descending at a snail's pace, no more insects that stick to your skin to while away their tedium. All of that had perhaps existed one day, in another era, in a parallel world – but for the moment, there was nothing but Eugene D. Ellis, and a mission that looked as if it might never end.

"But that's no big deal. I'll take my time. He'll come back in the end. They always do. And I swear to you that the loop will stay knotted until he does. There'll be a birthday party then, you can take it from me. I'll force him to tell me how to deliver Cora. After that, I'll shoot him like a dog. A bullet between the eyes, no hesitation at all."

I too had been erased from his mind. He was only talking to himself, like some senile dotard replaying scenes from the good old days. The Ellis house had no more need of me, now that his story had found an audience. I had no other role to play but to listen, to understand and to disappear. To keep up appearances. Then again, Juniper would soon be home from school, and I preferred to avoid having to cross her path. And Eugene and Jackson needed time to cover up the traces, to go through the routine.

I knew well enough what I had to do: to go back to Lucy at the grocery store, take my place behind the counter, surrounded by jars and laden shelves; to say "yes, Eugene thanks you for the provisions, everything's all right, no, the baby hasn't come yet" – although I'm such a wretched actor that Lucy knows how to read my face well enough to count the glasses I've downed; to wait for the time to pass and the affair to be settled, in whatever manner it will be; to resume a normal life, regulated by the rhythm of the cash register and the tinkle of the bell that announces the advent of customers.

Every afternoon, at about four o'clock, I would try to not to think about it.

There remained, even so, one detail that bothered me. I had tried to picture in my mind the man to be shot: the one who had taken Eugene's place in Cora's bed. The kind of person who might be capable of planting those degenerate seeds and vanishing, leaving someone else to pick up the pieces. But no matter how I imagined him, he always had Eugene's features. I had changed the colour of his hair, remodelled his build, added forty pounds, with no effect. All those small brown fat people, those mountains of muscle, those giant moustaches, had but a single face. Perhaps I'm naively old-fashioned, but I had never believed that Cora was the sort who would seek satisfaction away from home.

"Just one last thing, Gene. What if you *were* the father, after all?"

His stance changed as if to recall my presence, but the face that he turned towards me was closed upon itself. His fingers were clenched upon the butt of the rifle, mechanically.

"I'll wait until the son of a bitch has the guts to show up. Then – a bullet between the eyes. No hesitation."

A translation of another of French writer Melanie Fazi's stories appeared earlier in 2004 in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Scence Fiction*, although her other publications to date are all in French.

Brian Stableford has published more than fifty novels, the latest being *Asgard's Secret, Book One of The Asgard Trilogy*, which was published in hardback by Five Star in October 2004 (271pp, $25.95).

from THE ADVENTURES OF LUTHER ARKWRIGHT by BRYAN TALBOT

THESE THINGS HAPPEN

BRYAN TALBOT INTERVIEWED

ANDREW HEDGECOCK

Comic book artist Bryan Talbot is a consummate illustrator and a bravura juggler of plot lines, illustrative styles, symbols and genres. I came across his classic graphic novel, *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, in Preston's Harris Museum and Art Gallery more than 20 years ago. April 1983, to be as precise as I am able: I remember buying a copy with some of my winnings from backing Corbiere in that year's Grand National. And I've admired his dense, meticulously detailed and resonant work ever since.

So I'm keen to be well prepared for our interview: there's a good half an hour before I'm due to telephone Talbot and, for once, I'm really organised. Lucy, aged five, is lurking around my office – it's an inset day at school – but she's been thoroughly briefed to keep the noise down. Conference phone plugged in, notebook at the ready, dictaphone with new batteries and blank tape, pens laid out: what could possibly go wrong? With hindsight, it was all too predictable that Lucy, playing keepy-up with a balloon, would snag her foot in the phone cable, whip the handset halfway across the room, tip coffee all over the desk and scatter paper everywhere.

The phone's a virtual write-off. By the time I make the call, Talbot sounds as though he's speaking from Ulan Bator rather than Sunderland, his soft Lancashire accent barely audible against an aural wash of crackles and hisses. But we manage to talk for an hour or so, as Talbot inks images for his forthcoming graphic novel, the semi-autobiographical, historical and mythic *Alice in Sunderland*. "I can ink and talk at the same time," he asserts, "it's a very mechanical process so I can switch off from it and concentrate on your questions."

The statement is typical of Bryan Talbot's unpretentious approach to his craft: he has little appetite for inflating his own reputation or augmenting the mystique of his role as a creative artist. His practical perspective and eclectic approach to form, technique and subject have their roots in a childhood passion for comics – as creator and consumer.

"I've always been fascinated by comics: I've been drawing them for my own amusement since I was eight or nine, when I used to buy sheets of cheap typewriter paper at Woolworths and staple them together. I often used to get half a dozen pages from the end and have to wrap the story up in a hurry. The first continuing one was called 'Fred Kelly': it was about a private detective, very much inspired by the 'Send for Kelly' strip in the *Topper*. My characters looked similar to theirs but I made new stories up: 'Send for Kelly' was a one-page, weekly comedy strip, but my stories were longer, and had elements of James Bond and *The Avengers*."

So Talbot's tendency to cram everything that interests him into every story he creates is life long. And his work is characterised by a voracious appetite for stories: I ask if there were other early sources of inspiration.

"I enjoyed Enid Blighton's Famous Five stories as a kid, and SF and horror too. I watched Flash Gordon serials when I was small and remember watching the TV version of *Quatermass and the Pit* – terrifying, but I loved it. I got into horror when I was 11 and read Dracula, Poe, Conan Doyle and Frankenstein – really heavy going, that one. Then, when I was 14, I discovered Dennis Wheatley's Black Magic books.

"I loved Leo Baxendale's strips even before I knew who'd drawn them: the way he'd cram all that detail into things like the Bash Street Kids – all those different things going on. DC Thompson wouldn't let anyone sign their work but you could always recognise Leo's style. When I was about 4 an uncle gave me a pile of Giles cartoon annuals and I used to pore over those. Some of them were about political events of the week, but I just used to look at the pictures. Then there was Flook by George Melly and Wally Fawkes and Rip Kirby, a private detective strip."

NOBODY SWORE, NOBODY HAD SEX, NOBODY VOMITED

Bryan Talbot was born and raised in Wigan in Lancashire. After completing a foundation year at Wigan School of Art he studied Graphic Design at Preston Polytechnic.

"I wanted to do *something* in art, but I had no idea what – that's how I ended up on my graphics course I suppose. I didn't realise you could make a living drawing comics: if I had I would have studied illustration."

A serendipitous encounter with political and counterculture activist Lee Harris, founder of the legendary Alchemy headshop in the Portobello Road, dug the foundations for Talbot's career. Still at college, he visited London in the hope of selling work to Cozmic Comics. A strip, The Insane Psychiatrist, was accepted but no further issues were published and Talbot's artwork was lost. During that trip, he met Harris at Alchemy and talked about his work. Later, Talbot showed him sketches featuring Chester P. Hackenbush, the psychedelic alchemist. Harris's response was that if Talbot were ever to complete the story he'd publish it. Two years later, when Talbot had finished college, he was unemployed and living with his wife and two young children.

"So I thought I might as well get on with this strip. I took it down to Lee and true to his word he published it and said 'well you'd better get on with the next one'. And that's how it started really."

Published as *Brainstorm One* at the fag end of the underground era of comic publishing, the Hackenbush tales were very much of their time: Talbot acknowledges they slotted fairly comfortably into the well-established sub-genre of psychedelic adventure story. But, while they reflect Talbot's enthusiasms and formative influences, they are in no way a slavish imitation. References to American strips and the 1960s underground merge with allusions to classic British illustration of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the 'trippy' imagery is complemented by references to English literature and folklore.

"I was working in the counterculture tradition – a mindset that focused on Vietnam, sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, experimentation, you know, fill in the form . . . but I was too young to be a hippie. And, on the other hand, too old to be a punk, but that DIY ethos did feed into my work. By the time things had moved from 'underground' towards 'alternative', represented by the kind of small press comics of today, I wanted to take that underground ethos into what people would have been regarded at the time as a mainstream story.

"And I did that quite deliberately with *Luther Arkwright* – I was trying to get stuff in there that hadn't been dealt with by comics before. I started the first chapter in 1978 and they were serialised over the next few years: in comics at the time nobody swore, nobody had sex, nobody vomited. It sounds a bit inane now, I suppose, but I was thinking 'these things happen in life so why can they not happen in comics?' My aim was to do a comic that was as textured as a novel."

Set in a richly imagined multiverse where forces of order and chaos strive for supremacy, *The Adventures of Luther*

Arkwright included elements of espionage, SF, historical romance and political allegory – there's a strongly anti-fascist aspect to the story. And Talbot's experimental approach to storytelling led to comparisons the luminaries of New Wave SF and filmmakers like Nicholas Roeg and Sam Peckinpah.

Arkwright's tale attracted a committed readership and plaudits from Michael Moorcock, Iain Banks, John Brunner, Neil Gaiman, Clive Barker and Harlan Ellison. Talbot resisted the idea of a sequel for many years, but the world he'd created had a powerful claim on his imagination and *Heart of Empire*, another allegorical rejection of fascism and imperialism, appeared in 1999. The flow is more linear this time around and the narrative is more accessible. But the distinctive reworking of genre traditions and complex layering of symbols remain an important part of the storytelling mix. I ask Talbot if the book represents the final dispatch from Arkwright's multiverse, or if there is more to come.

"I'm still getting all these ideas for Arkwright's world and there may be a third and final story. I'm still some way off knowing what it's about but I want to make it as different from *Heart of Empire* as that was from the *Adventures of Luther Arkwright*."

A PERVY TORY MP

If *Luther Arkwright* was self-consciously experimental, *The Tale of One Bad Rat* emerged from Talbot's experience and imagination more organically. Published in 1995, it features Helen, a troubled young woman with a tormented and occluded history. Helen's story is based on a couple of flashes of inspiration and a considerable amount of exhaustive research.

"I've been going up to the Lake District there since I was 14 and it was in the back of my mind for years to set a story there. At some point I thought 'right let's do it' and started by reading books on the area to see if that would give me any ideas. I thought the romantic poets might be interesting point of entry, but one day we visited Beatrix Potter's house, Hill Top, now owned by the National Trust and left as it was when she died in 1943. I was struck by the simple connection between us: she used to do books using words and pictures, so do I. I thought that might be a way in. I didn't know a lot about Potter; I didn't even read her books when I was little. So I started researching her life: I read a dozen books and joined the Beatrix Potter Society; but, at some point, I decided a dramatised biography wasn't going to be very interesting.

"Soon after that I was in London, on the tube, I saw a homeless girl begging and being hassled by this big, bearded Jesus freak. The girl put me in mind of descriptions of Beatrix Potter at 16 – painfully shy – and I suddenly thought: 'what if she could have some obscure connection with Potter, a synchronistic link that leads her towards something?' So I started plotting it and wondered why she'd left home. A lot of kids who run away from home have been abused, so I decided 'her father's been abusing her' – quick as that. As I researched the subject I realised it was too important to be a 'MacGuffin' to move the story forward: I couldn't marginalise it in that way, it had to *be* the story."

From the events that ripple across the time streams of Luther Arkwright's multiverse to the serendipitous collision of real life incident and literary reference, this merging of themes, characters and motifs is typical of Talbot's work. All the characters in *The Tale of One Bad Rat* are named after Potter characters or important people in her life. Helen waitresses in the Herdwick Arms, named after the breed of sheep Potter raised in Cumbria; a pervy Tory MP pursues Helen shouting 'stop thief', grumpy Mr MacGregor's only line of dialogue in Peter Rabbit; there's a room with a Victorian painting, 'Love Locked Out', on the wall – the painting that inspired Potter to paint Peter Rabbit standing on a doorstep. I ask Talbot if he sees synchronicity, in the Jungian sense of meaningful coincidence, as a force that impacts on his life or as a means of generating and telling stories.

"I've read around the subject a bit, but it's really just for fun. It does seem to force its way into stories at times: in the final section of the book, 'Country', Helen is working as a waitress and I had her shouting out the number of the food order she's dealing with. I usually stick 23 in when I can, in homage to the 23 enigma. I was going through the second draft and I thought, 'no, not 23, this has to be relevant to Beatrix Potter'. So I checked how many 'little books', as she called them, she did. There were 23.

"This was the first book I'd drawn where I cast the characters and used real people as models. I'd done sketches of what I wanted Helen to look like. I was giving a talk at a college in Preston, and asked people if they would like to audition: one was fantastic, she looked just like the sketches for Helen. While I was talking to her a tall, lanky guy walked in at the back – glasses, dark curly hair, heavy metal T-shirt and leather jacket. So I took the script out in my bag and asked this guy to read the description of one of the characters, Ben. It was *him*. I'd even done sketches that looked like him. I asked if I could take some pictures and he said 'yes, you can. My name's Ben.' It was like I'd invoked him by drawing him."

DOOM-LADEN MELANCHOLY

If Talbot's interest in synchronicity is that of a storyteller, what about the references to occult knowledge that recur throughout his work? Do magick and urban shamanism represent powerful personal interests?

"I've never been a practitioner like Alan Moore, but I've always been fascinated by that stuff. When I was 12, I asked for an Encyclopaedia of Witchcraft and Demonology for Christmas."

Talbot disappears from the line for a few seconds.

"The dust jacket has gone, but I have it here. Russell Hope Robbins, FRSL, first published in 1959. There's an amazing 18th century etching of a succubus that inspired a scene in *Heart of Empire*."

This relish for supernatural tales and occult symbolism is evident in his work on the first segment of *Nightjar*. A project initiated by Talbot and Alan Moore in 1980, it featured an urban shaman, Mirrigan Demdyke, an idea reworked and explored in more detail by Moore with the character of John Constantine in *Swamp Thing*.

"*Nightjar* came from my early fascination with witches and the legend of Pendle Hill. Alan and I had been discussing a collaboration and he jumped at the chance to set something in Lancashire. He came up a couple of times and we spent a day driving around Pendle, taking reference pictures. We had lunch at the Pendle Witch in Sabden: they used to have a big lurid mural of a witches' Sabbath that filled a whole wall – a bit Goyaesque. Pendle is a fantastic location – it has a great atmosphere. Very creepy."

An atmosphere I've experienced for myself on many occasions. In the early 1980s I used to drive from Preston to Sabden for a drink with my mate Ian Currie. The only time the village shed its air of doom-laden melancholy was on Halloween, when the brooding slopes of Pendle were as packed as Blackpool's Golden Mile in high season. But is it an awareness of the local legend that lends the area its eerie atmosphere? Talbot thinks not.

charged with a sense of strangeness. Is it the shape and size of that hill? Does that big block of millstone grit have some kind of magnetic pull? I think that's why these strange events took place there. That's *why* there was witchcraft at Pendle.

"On the last page of our original section there's an old lady in a house in Sabden, and it all goes up in flames. I was drawing this part of the strip and listening to the local news on the radio: there was an item saying a terraced house in the shadow of Pendle had burned down with this old lady in it. Chilling."

Nightjar was shelved after a dispute between Alan Moore and the publisher, but in 2003, Talbot was contacted by Avatar Press who were reissuing a lot of Moore's work and asked to finish the artwork for the first chapter. Talbot did, but felt unable to take the project further. It has now been picked up by writer Antony Johnson and artist Max Fiumara (www.mostlyblack.com).

EVERYBODY DIES AT THE SUNDERLAND EMPIRE

Talbot's latest work is a totally new departure in terms of technique, theme and approach to storytelling. The artist and his wife, an academic, moved to Sunderland six years ago and his latest work is a multilayered biography of his adopted city – an exploration of its contribution to British culture with points of reference in literature, history and the arts. There are two main thematic threads that digress and recombine as the narrative moves along. which Talbot sees as a history of Britain in microcosm. The other is the story of Lewis Carroll and his muse Alice Liddell.

"I've had it in mind to do something about Carroll and Alice for years and years, and when we moved here I found they had loads of connections with Sunderland. At the end of my street is a park, much praised by Carroll's brother in law, and the museum in the park was where Carroll first saw a walrus. He would often come up here to see his cousins and wrote 'Jabberwocky' up here. Alice Liddell's father was born here and her grandfather was a rector here. All these connections provided the spark for it all.

"It's not like anything I've done before. It's not genre, it's not even a story: it's lots of stories and it's about storytelling. The setting is parochial, but the themes are, I hope, universal. I'm just telling different stories, the ones that created our culture and some that mean a lot locally. The Legend of the Lambton Worm is the most fully formed dragon myth in Britain, and it's set here on the River Wear.

"I walked the city's sculpture trail, all along the river and down to the beach with the main sculptor, Colin Wilbourn, and Chaz Brenchley, who was *crime* writer in residence for the project. I hammered the experience into a script and sent it to Chaz and Colin. And that bit, co-written with the two of them, is going into the comic too."

The structure for this complex edifice of words and images is provided by a performance in the Sunderland Empire, a beautiful Edwardian palace of varieties that survives to the present day. The story celebrates the diversity of English culture, particularly its antiauthoritarian, popular traditions. The ghost of comedy actor Sid James is a minor character. Sid died of a heart attack on stage at the Empire. Talbot tells the story of his final curtain: "When the manager asked if there was a doctor in the house the audience thought he was joking and erupted with laughter. The manager phoned Sid's agent to say he'd died at the Empire and the agent replied 'Oh well, everybody dies in Sunderland'. It had the reputation of being one of the hardest audiences in the country, even with American vaudeville performers.

"The book is going to be a variety performance too, with the style changing for each story. This is the first book I've put together on computer so I'm doing a lot of stuff at the drawing board, scanning it and manipulating it with other images. I'm using whatever's suitable: some stories are told in watercolours, some in full colour collage, some in monochrome and some in black and white line. I'm doing the Lambton Worm in an arts and craftsy style, like classic fantasy. I want to do another important local legend, 'the Cauld Lad of Hylton', set at Hylton Castle, in EC horror style. There's a Jabberwocky bit in the style of Tenniel, there's photocollage and there are scenes with treated photographs in the background. The styles will be dictated by the subject matter."

The publication of *Alice in Sunderland* is more than a year away, but a new US monthly anthology, *Words and Pictures*, plans to serialise it beginning next spring. Talbot is approaching the serialisation with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. The digressive style may, he feels, be a challenge for some readers.

"I'm sure some people will see the first few bits and think 'what the hell is all that about then?' In the book, I'm continually feeding readers information in advance that will help them flow into upcoming bits. The more the story progresses, the more it becomes interconnected, interwoven. The structure is the important thing. The encouraging thing is that I sent it to Leo Baxendale and he said the structure of the thing was 'magisterial'. I was *so* pleased with that, as you can imagine."

Readers can catch up with the latest news about Bryan Talbot and his work at The Official Bryan Talbot Fanpage (www.bryan-talbot.com), an excellent set of resources, including images, articles, links and shopping. Webmaster James Robertson, provided the technical expertise for the annotated CD-ROM presentation of *Heart of Empire*.

THIRST
vandana singh
illustrated by robert dunn

In the dream there were snakes coiling about her, dark and glossy as the hairs on her head, and an altar, and the smell of sandalwood incense, her mother's favorite kind. When her eyes opened she could not remember for a moment who she was. Even the familiar room, with the whitewash peeling off the walls and summer dust on the sill of the open window, the sag of the bed, the curve of the man's shoulders as he lay in sleep with his back to her – all that seemed imbued with remoteness, as though it had nothing whatever to do with *her*. Slowly her name came to her: Susheela, and with it the full weight of her misery returned. Her husband stirred in sleep, but he did not turn towards her.

Then she remembered (as she sat up very carefully so as not to wake her husband) that tomorrow was the day of Naag Panchami, the Snake Festival, and *that* was why the dream had come. The monsoons were late, and this was the hottest summer ever. Perhaps it would rain tomorrow. A Festival day rain would be a good thing. She slipped out of bed, bathed quickly using an inadequate half a bucketful of water and dressed in a pink cotton sari. An early morning hush lay deep over the house; the ceiling fans had wound down during the night (another power failure) and even the birds in the bougainvillea outside the window seemed reluctant to break the silence. As Susheela entered the kitchen she heard the creak of her mother-in-law's bed from the other end of the house, and the old woman's plastic slippers slapping the bare floor as she shuffled to the bathroom. Susheela's son was very likely still asleep in his grandmother's bed; she could see him in her mind's eye, forehead beaded with sweat, plump hands closed into fists, cheeks flushed with heat, lips tremulous with the passage of some childish dream. For a moment she wanted desperately to see him and hold him, but she could not face the old lady just yet. Instead she put the tea water on to boil and turned on the taps so that when the water came (one precious hour in the morning and one in the evening) the buckets would begin to fill for the day's use. Now the tap only belched warm air; heat came in from the small window like the breath of a hungry animal.

She stood at the window, looking out into the courtyard and the untended garden behind it. The drought had reduced the back garden to a mass of dead, spiny shrubs dotting withered grass. Only the little harsingar tree stood proud, its young, leafy branches dotted with tiny orange and white flowers. It had survived on a daily cupful of water and her love.

Afterwards, as she rolled paratha dough for her husband's breakfast, hoping she would not (again) make him late for office, she heard the household stir; and the water came gurgling out of the taps. She felt the old hunger in her as though she was waiting for something. As the earth waits for rain, she thought, licking her dry lips.

She thought of the lake in the park, and – despite herself – the thin face of the gardener who worked there, and the way he said 'namaste' so respectfully while his eyes looked at her in a way that dissolved all distance between them, all barriers of class and caste and propriety . . . She really shouldn't go there so often. But Kishore loves it, her mind said rebelliously, and she thought of how her little boy loved to walk under the trees and watch the parakeets eat the neem berries. She would make up stories for him about imaginary people who lived in the ruins around the lake and ate nothing but milk-sweets all day. The park was on the way to the vegetable market that came up in the late afternoon like a miniature city on the sidewalks, complete with towers of jewel-toned purple eggplants and cascades of coriander leaves and citadels of fat, shiny little onions. The market was her excuse for surreptitious visits to the lake in the park, with her boy (poor, innocent boy!) as chaperone and protector. Sweat rolled off her temples; she dabbed at it with the free end of her sari and thought of the translucent coolness of the lake, the lips of the water against her bare toes. I am a cursed woman, she thought to herself with a shudder. My mother-in-law is right, the water draws me and draws me, to what other thing but death. Curses do run in families. She thought of her own mother, and her maternal grandmother, and she resolved that today she would not go to the lake, even though that would make Kishore cry.

In the end she broke her promise to herself, as she had done many times before. In the dry, breathless heat of the day, Susheela felt as though the air in her lungs had turned solid. She went blindly about her tasks, cooking and serving lunch, piling the steel dishes noisily in the sink for the servant boy to wash when he came in the evening. The grandmother took Kishore off for his afternoon nap. Susheela collected the kitchen leavings – potato peels, turnip ends and scraps from lunch – into a battered tin and went up the short driveway to the front gate. Dead leaves crunched under her feet. Piling the refuse by the side of the gate, she waited for Muniya, the milkman's ancient cow, to come meandering down the lane.

The lane shimmered in the heat. The three shisham trees in the garden stood very still, their small, round leaves drooping. Behind her the house crouched like a yellow cat. Plaster flaked off its front, revealing an underflesh of burnt red brick. Susheela leaned on the gate. A breeze, no more than a breath, stirred the dead leaves on the trees, smelling of dust. But Susheela smelled – or imagined she smelled – water.

Suddenly she made up her mind. She crept into the still, dark house and saw with relief that the grandmother had fallen asleep with Kishore. The two lay together like exhausted children, damp with sweat, the old lady's arm protectively around the boy. I have not been a good mother, Susheela thought. Her eyes burned with tears. She went out into the bright and dusty afternoon.

In less than ten minutes she was at the iron fence, with the rusty, indecipherable Archeological Survey of India sign leaning over the entrance. She paused for a moment, looking around her a little apprehensively. A bicycle-repairman sat nodding under a tree with his paraphernalia around him, but there was no one else about. She let herself into the gap in the fence where there had once been a gate; inside, tall neem trees made deep shadows. A clerk or two lay sleeping in the shade. Then she saw the gardener, sleeping, his turban spread out over his face. The bullock that had been pulling the lawn mower lay beside him like a white, humped mountain, chewing cud. Susheela crept soundlessly to the lake's edge.

The lake itself was small, more like a large pond. The edge was paved with stone, brown and weathered with age; at one end there was the old ruin with crumbling steps leading down into the quiet, green water. What ancients had built and frequented the place Susheela did not know, but it was tranquil here, under the neem trees. The water had receded with the heat of summer, but there was enough to allow a few fragile blue lotuses to bloom in the shade.

She leaned against a tree trunk, savoring the peace. Then she slipped a slender brown foot out of her embroidered shoe, over the sun-warmed stone paving into the water. She felt the cool silk of the water on her foot, and a tremendous longing arose within her, a desire to feel the water lick the dry heat from her body, to envelop her in its fluid embrace . . .

Some small sound jolted her back into herself. She withdrew her foot hurriedly from the water, wiped it on the stone. What had she been about to do? A bead of sweat ran down her cheek to the corner of her mouth. Then she saw that there was something in the water, making ripples as it swam towards her. A turtle, perhaps – or a snake? She leaned forward, peering. In the emerald depths, apparitions of pale fish scattered as the thing came closer. It was a snake – a cobra.

Just as she identified it she saw a stone skimming over the water, falling a few feet short. The snake dived and disappeared.

Her skin prickled. The gardener was standing beside her.

"They say it is good to see a cobra the day before the Snake Festival," he said. He wiped the sweat off his face with his turban. "It means rain. But better not to let the Naag Lords get too close, *behen*. Would you like some flowers? Amaltas blooms, yellow as sunlight, lovely tied in your bun, against your neck . . . or would you prefer . . . a delicate twig of harsingar?"

She edged away nervously. For a moment she imagined his fingers on the nape of her neck.

"No, I don't want anything," she said shortly. He was looking at her without any shame, as though she were a woman of his own class, not a respectably married housewife. But respectably married housewives didn't wander about parks alone.

"If ever there is anything you need . . . I will be happy to serve you. But tell me, where is your little boy?"

Oh why hadn't she brought Kishore? She looked around her, terrified, and was reassured to see a young couple enter the park, holding hands surreptitiously. Some of her fear abated.

"I have to go," she said, drawing herself up. The gardener put his palms together, accepting her dismissal, his gaze licking at her face. "*Achha, behen-ji*," he said. Yes, sister. He watched her leave. She was conscious of the movement of her hips, the slight swing of her arms, the dust she raised with every step. She did not draw breath until she was out in the lane.

She had grown up off-balance. All her life she had carried inside her an empty space that disturbed her center of gravity, that drew her to the sheltering closeness of trees, walls, wilderness. Nothing she had done in her life – not her studentship, not marriage, not even the birth of her son – had assuaged that emptiness, that feeling of the earth waiting for rain. She was still waiting.

In her childhood the Snake Festival had been special. It was the one day she had always understood to be her own. Here in this small town where her husband had grown up, Naag Panchami would be marked only by a visit to the temple and prayers to the gods to prevent death by snakebite. But in her hometown of Ujjain, tomorrow, there would be special ceremonies and processions in the streets . . .

In her parents' house, every Festival day, the child Susheela had helped her mother arrange flowers and sweet offerings on the kitchen altar. Dressed in silks, Susheela had sat with her brother on the flower-strewn floor, watching as their mother lit the oil diyas. In the flickering light, her mother would become remote and solemn, chanting the ancient Sanskrit phrases: homage to the snakes of the earth. Homage to the snakes in the rays of sun, the tree-snakes. Homage to the snakes of the waters, homage to them all. The names of the Snake lords were then recited: Anantha, who supports the earth in his coils, Vasuki the king, who rules their fabulous, gem-studded underworld city. Takshaka, Muchilinda, all the greater and the lesser lords. They bring us life, her mother would say; they foster fertility and renewal. They bring also death. They are in the fire of Agni and in the primeval ocean.

Her mother would turn from the altar to her children and take the child Susheela onto her lap. Then the stories would come, wondrous tales, fierce or sad; about the Snake divinities speaking to gods and mingling secretly with humans; about their exquisite underwater palaces, where they kept the knowledge and wisdom they had accumulated, waiting until humankind was ready for the gift. As her mother spoke her hands would rise and fall in smooth and sudden gestures, and the stories, built thus of words and hands, would come to life in the fragrant air. Her mother's urbanized Hindi would give way to the sing-song village dialect she had spoken as a girl. Even as a five-year-old, Susheela was aware that what was being passed on to them on these occasions was meant particularly for her; that her brother, sitting wistful-eyed across from them was in some inexplicable way, excluded.

But the most wonderful thing about it all was that the three of them were sheltered for a while, in a cocoon of mystery and ceremony, from the mundane, silent bitterness between her parents. Her father kept away from them during Naag Panchami, leaving them to an unfamiliar peace. As she grew older, it became increasingly clear to Susheela that the undercurrents of ill-feeling in the house, the raised voices (mainly her father's) behind locked doors in the night, the misery, guilt and yearning in her mother's eyes – were all her fault. Her father treated her with a distant regard; his love he kept for his son, expressing it with his eyes whenever he looked at the boy, unaware that the boy feared him and longed to escape.

Coming home from school – she remembered how it felt to enter the dark, polished hallway, the high-arched ceilings – how the house diminished her. The respite of the garden and the parakeets in the guava trees, the three harsingar trees (her favorite kind) bright with tiny flowers . . . And then quite suddenly she was grown up and her marriage arranged with a stranger she had met only three times. He had come once for tea in the garden, and later they had walked together, chaperoned by her mother and aunts. She had lost her reserve, pointing out to him the trees and flowers and her favorite shady spot under the jamun tree, and he had impressed her with the way his hands touched the blossoms, the ripe fruit, so gently for such a big, quiet man. She had wanted him to touch her like that . . .

For the five years of her marriage the Festival had brought her nothing but shadows from the past, and a small remembrance from her brother. Only this year – this year was different. The intensity of the old dream, the tightness in her chest, the feeling of breathless anticipation . . . Entering the dim stillness of the house,

Susheela found herself longing for her son. But he was still asleep in his grandmother's bed. She wanted to hold him forever because she feared that she would not hesitate to leave him for the nameless hunger that was in her.

In the late afternoon, when the heat had abated a little, Susheela's husband came home from work. His name was Prakash, but she couldn't think of him by his name, only by the way he made her feel, a mixture of bewilderment and yearning. Kishore ran up to him at the doorway, calling "Baba!" in his high voice. The child had sulked all afternoon when she told him they were not going to the park. Finally she had made him a paper boat and told him he could play in the washing-up water. Now he held out the damp boat to his father. A brief smile broke the serious cast of her husband's face, accentuating the lines that made him look older than he was. He glanced at Susheela quickly, noncommittally, and went into the back to wash his hands, leaving in his wake a faint odor of musty offices and old ledgers. Standing in the silence and heat of the dining room, with the silver teapot and the array of delicacies arranged on the table, Susheela felt suddenly bereft of hope. How had she come to this?

Once she had almost loved him. Not at first – she remembered sitting terrified before the nuptial fire under a canopy of marigolds in the front lawn, with this man that she hardly knew. Her father had died the previous year. She had left the large suburban bungalow, the luxuriant garden that had been her refuge, and her mother, alone, serene now after years of unhappiness, but with a haunted, fragile air about her – all that, for the life of a senior accountant's wife in a strange town. Still, in the beginning, her husband's gentleness had won her over. He had been loving and attentive, filling her with a joyous, incredulous relief, allaying her fears that her married life would be as dreary and bereft of happiness as her mother's had been. She had started to fall in love with him, with his patience, his long, contemplative silences, and the inexplicable, endearing seriousness with which he took his work. But then, quite soon after the birth (nearly painless) of their son, everything had changed. Her husband suddenly began to avoid her as much as was possible, and sometimes she had caught him giving her peculiar, wary, sidelong glances that she could not fathom. It had disturbed the healthy, animal joyfulness of motherhood.

He had evaded her questions, meeting her pleas, tears and anger with a pained silence. Finally she had come to accept that things would stay this way between them. Four years later he was still the kind, quiet man she'd known, but he had kept his distance; he no longer looked at her much, even when they (infrequently) made love.

The evening wore on – dark fell and mosquitoes came swarming in through cracks in the shutters. The power was still out so her husband lit candles in the rooms that cast large, tremulous shadows. The air was thick as a blanket.

There was a sudden loud crash in the house, and the sound of water splashing. Her mother-in-law screamed, "Susheela? Arrey Susheela! Look what your son just did! Don't cry, my darling . . . "

In the kitchen, which was lit dimly by a candle, Kishore stood soaked to the skin in the washing-up water. The bucket lay overturned on the floor. He was crying noisily, holding the soggy remains of the paper boat. As Susheela picked him up, her mother-in-law shook her head. "It's the curse on your family!" she said. "Drawn to water – and to death! He had climbed into the bucket with his boat. He would have drowned if I had not come in just then. My poor boy, what will become of him!"

"Let her be, Ma-ji," her husband said. He was standing in the doorway. He gave Susheela a quick, shy look. When she came towards the door with their son he laid his hand on the boy's dripping head.

"Susheela?"

He spoke her name tentatively, questioningly, but her eyes were already filling with tears. She stepped past him with her burden. In the bedroom she stood Kishore on the bed to dry him down and change his clothes. "I'll make you another boat tomorrow," she told him, glad that the semi-darkness hid her tears. Curses did run in families . . . She remembered her brother's escapades to the pond at the end of their street when they had been children, and how their father had scolded him as he stood dripping and half-naked on the polished floor of the hall. Nothing he said had made a difference to the boy; the next afternoon he would be gone again with the servant children, diving and splashing in the pond among gleaming green lily-pads, coming reluctantly home in the evenings through the dining room window, all aglow with his adventure, swearing her to secrecy . . .

The power came back suddenly. Susheela blinked in the light. The ceiling fans began their laborious circumlocutions, and the still air began to move. Her son laughed, jumped off the bed and went to find his father, holding out his little arms like airplane wings.

Late that evening, after the servant-boy had finished doing the dinner dishes and been dismissed, Susheela stood alone in the kitchen, finishing the day's chores. She could hear the low sound of the TV from the drawing room. In the small bedroom that her son shared with his grandmother, her mother-in-law was singing some old, half-remembered lullaby. In the storeroom, above the bins and sacks of grain, the gods gazed at Susheela from the altar – a brass statuette of Vishnu the Creator, reclining under the sheltering hood of the great serpent Ananth; Krishna with his flute, a meditative Buddha and a print of Lord Shiva. She cleaned the altar of dead flowers, lit an incense stick and watched the smoke curl up to the rough, whitewashed ceiling.

One more task remained. She filled a steel bowl with cold milk, put the rest of the milk into the small fridge, and took the flashlight. She had watched her mother do this every night for years in their home in Ujjain. Now, with her mother gone, the ritual gave her comfort. She went into the silent, moonlit courtyard behind the house, staying close to the wall. She walked up to the harsingar tree, which stood green and proud amidst the detritus of dead bushes and thorny shrubs. It always bloomed out of season, as though it obeyed the laws of some other universe. Under the tree lay a great stone, upon which she set down the steel bowl of milk. She turned off the flashlight. Would the snakes come, as her mother had always said? Usually she'd leave the milk on the stone and go back into the house, but today she wanted to wait.

The fragrance of the harsingar flowers filled her nostrils. The little tree was doing well. It had appeared last winter, the day before the festival of Diwali. She had just gotten back from the market with her mother-in-law. The servant boy did not know who had come into the compound in

the afternoon and planted the tree. Susheela's mother-in-law said it must be the gardener who worked in the park – he had been trying to hire himself out in the neighborhood. Or maybe it was the lady from the Big House, the wife of Susheela's husband's supervisor, who had the huge ornamental garden that her mother-in-law had frequently admired. That is what Susheela wanted to believe.

The tree itself was innocent of its origins. She had loved it from the first moment she had seen it. Now it stood partly shading the great stone, beautiful in the moonlight. She shut her eyes and breathed in its scent. There was a sound – a soft, dry, sliding sound, scales against stone. When she opened her eyes the gleam of moonlight on the steel bowl vanished abruptly, and she thought she could see dark, coiled shapes against the stone. Let there be rain tomorrow, she said in her mind. She could not name the nebulous other thing she desired.

Very carefully she gathered half a handful of flowers from the tree and walked back to the house without turning on the flashlight. Inside she put the flowers on the altar in the kitchen. I will put some in my hair tomorrow, she told herself, switching off the light.

That night Susheela fell asleep thinking of her mother's mother, the grandmother she had never known except from old family pictures. This grandmother had brought up six children in a huge, old-fashioned house in the ancestral village. One day the river had broken its banks and filled the emptiness of the big house. The family took refuge on the rooftop terrace. The eldest son was missing – he had been visiting a neighbor. Grandfather had injured his leg so Grandmother went in the little boat, steering with a long pole, in the muddy water full of debris, pots and pans and bewildered river fish. She found her son, delivered him, then went to the aid of her neighbors. She rescued a woman stuck in a tree, several other people clinging to hut-roofs, and a variety of animals, including dogs, goat-kids and muskrats. In the evening she cooked dinner on the rooftop over a coal fire, quite calmly, as though nothing unusual had happened. As dark fell, she told her eldest son, who was still awake, that she had to go do one more thing. She looked on the sleeping, exhausted family one more time, got into the boat, pushed off with the pole, and disappeared over the murky water. She was never seen again.

Stories gathered around the legendary grandmother like moths about a candle flame. She had given herself to the river, people said, so the floods would not come again. Susheela's mother, the youngest child, had been a teenager at the time of the disappearance; she remembered it well, years later, but she did not like to talk about it. Her face would fall slack with the memory. Then Susheela would gaze into her mother's eyes and think she saw what her mother saw: the flood, the dark water, the sole woman in the boat, steering herself away between the drowned houses, under a silent sky.

Her mother was a haunted woman, she knew. Soon after Susheela's marriage she had heard that her mother had gone to visit her ancestral home. At this, Susheela had felt a vague presentiment of disaster. But newly married, and pregnant, she had not been permitted to leave. A month later, Susheela had heard from her brother that their mother had walked to the river one morning, with flowers for worship, and that later that day, her clothes had been found floating some distance downriver from the house. Not long after that, Susheela had received a letter from her mother written a few days before the tragedy; the address on the envelope was nearly illegible and the ink was blurry and unreadable, as though the pages had been left out in the rain. Susheela had felt very clearly then that some intangible thing had passed from her mother's life into her own. For nearly five years it had been a heavy, mysterious presence within her.

She had seen that great river once, as a child. Now it came into her dreams, broad, serpentine, flowing between fragile cities, open fields and wilderness. She dreamed of floods, earthquakes, buildings tottering, the earth heaving, throwing off its old coverings, revealing roots, rocks, darkness. Twice she woke, and lay in the dark, trembling, her eyes wide open, listening to her husband breathe beside her. I must go, she thought, even if it is death that calls me.

Morning filled the house with a pale gray light; a cool breeze came in from the open windows, smelling of dust and anticipation. Susheela, breathless and light-headed, moved from room to room, distractedly applying the dust-cloth. In the kitchen she picked up a few of the harsingar flowers from the altar, hesitated, then put them down the front of her blouse for the fragrance. She did not have the patience to make a flower chain to weave in her hair. When her mother-in-law came into the kitchen Susheela was already rolling paratha dough for breakfast. She fed the family; she herself had no appetite. Her husband pushed away his empty plate with a sigh and unfolded the Sunday newspaper.

Susheela went to the front window in the drawing-room and perched on the cold sill. An army of storm-clouds was poised in the sky, and the breeze rattled the dry leaves on the trees. The raindrops fell, slowly at first, making pockmarks in the dust of the long summer; but in only a few minutes the dust became liquid mud, and the roadside ditches became torrents, and an aroma rose from the earth like a moist, cool breath of relief. All sounds were lost in the music of the rain. Neighbors gathered at their doorways, smiling, watching indulgently as children ran out of the houses and danced in the flooded, sparkling street. Then the clouds rumbled and lightning jagged across the sky. Parents called out to their children. Susheela, watching the rain, tried to decipher what message, if any, lay in its watery speech; what did it sing, as it drummed on the flat rooftops and gurgled in the ditches? She could not bear the thought that after all her waiting it would have nothing to say to her. Listening, she did not at first notice that Kishore was missing.

He'd been sulking; she had not let him go out with the neighborhood children. He must have slipped away while she sat dreaming on the sill. She raised an alarm, feeling her knees beginning to shake. Her husband set down his cup, spilling tea, grabbed an umbrella and went into the storm.

But Susheela knew just where he would be, in the park that sloped down to the lake, their favorite walk. She gathered her sari about her ankles and went into the blinding rain. Her shoes were light and flimsy, they soon filled with muddy water, but she stumbled on. On this day of all days, to lose him like this!

The lake was a blur; the rain fell like thick needles. She looked fearfully around, shading her eyes from the rain. There he was – huddled by one of the neem trees

that grew on the lake's edge. He was too heavy to pick up, he bent his head against the rain and sobbed wordlessly, but he let her set him on his feet. She thought she felt or heard something from the direction of the lake, but when she looked back, there was nothing.

She held Kishore to her in a tight grip, half-sobbing in her relief, babbling words of reassurance as she walked him back through the mud and rain to the house. She heard her husband call, saw him running up to them. Kishore looked up at her through a curtain of rain, and she thought she saw wonder in his face, then fear. He left her side and ran to his father, crying. Her mother-in-law was already at the front door with towels, scolding in her relief. Susheela stepped forward to follow her husband and son, anxious to reassure her little boy; what could make him look at her like that? But something made her hesitate on the top step. The rain streamed down her face, running in rivulets down her neck, between her breasts. Her bun had come undone and her hair lay wetly against her neck. Her sari was plastered to her skin. She itched all over. She saw now that there was a faint silvering all along her forearm, spreading rapidly over her skin. A tremor went through her.

She felt it now like a gravitational pull, as if whatever thread bound her to the lake was at last drawing her in. She turned, stumbled down the steps and began to run through the downpour. Behind her she heard her husband cry out her name, but her steps did not falter. Splashing through the water on the street and in the park, she stood at last, panting, on the lake's edge.

She had lost her shoes on the way and the stone paving felt slippery under her bare feet. There was only the sound of rain, sparkling on the lake's surface, drumming on the earth. Susheela put one foot into the water. A great shudder of desire went through her. She stepped into the lake, slipping a little on the stones. Mud squelched between her toes. The water rose to envelop her – it embraced her hips, her chest, her neck. As the water closed over her head she felt the change, like an electric current through her.

Her first feeling was that of sheer terror, as though something alien had invaded her mind and body. She thrashed about, rearing out of the water and falling back again with a splash, trying to see what or who was holding her arms to her sides, drowning her, but the rain fell in great curtains, obscuring everything. A spasm shook her from head to foot; as she lost consciousness she felt warm currents coursing painlessly through her, stretching and squeezing, shaping and molding, as though she were a lump of clay in a potter's wheel.

When she came to, she found herself afloat in the water, conscious only of a great need to fill her lungs with air. She struggled to free herself of her clothes, turning and twisting until she swam out from the limp, wet folds of her sari, raised her head into the rain, and breathed. She turned slowly, and saw that her new body was long, limbless and lithe. Her senses registered a thousand unfamiliar impressions: the agitation of water against her scales; the completely alien sensation of being able to feel, through her skin, tiny reverberations that hinted of life swarming all about her; and the presence, inside her mouth, of a strange tongue, forked and unbearably sensitive. An exultation rose inside her; she became aware of other presences around her, long, sinuous shapes, ancient, powerful, familiar. Their bodies were dark, their heads narrow, their eyes black, beckoning, alive. She turned smoothly in the water and saw that her underbelly was pale, like theirs. Now they were leading her, diving underwater. She took a breath of air and followed them into the depths of the lake, brushing against stone; she sensed she was swimming through the passageways of some underwater structure. Memories that were not her own, yet belonged to her in some mysterious way, came crowding into her mind: warm, narrow spaces in the earth, fluid darkness, the coilings of other bodies beside her. The earth, the womb, shutting out the wide emptiness of the world.

The snakes swam around her, guiding her with gentle nudges. In the dark water they were like slender, graceful ghosts. One touched her head with his, wheeling around her in an intricate spiral. They went up to the surface together to breathe, and taste the rain. The water was sensuous against her skin, and when the cobra leaned his head close to hers, with bright, ardent, questioning eyes, she felt a small explosion in her chest, as though a dam had burst, letting out all the needs and desires of her barren other life. That life, which she could scarcely remember now, seemed a distant dream; what was real was the movement of scale against scale, coil against coil, the flaring of her partner's majestic hood as they danced, braided about each other in the ancient, intimate rite of procreation. When at last they moved gracefully apart, to lie companionably in the water, spent but not exhausted, a picture came rudely into her mind, an alien intrusion: a small, hot, dusty room, a man asleep, his back to her, unreachable as a distant mountain. It was incomprehensible and disturbing, and she dismissed it sharply. The other snakes were coming up below her, swimming to the surface for air, and she joined them, moving playfully among them, dodging the raindrops. A feeling came to her then that she must have done this before, that this was all familiar, the snakes, the rain, the coupling in the water. That couldn't be – but the seed of a realization took root in her mind, and slowly flowered into certainty: that her mother had once done this. That this was how Susheela had been conceived . . . It was too enormous a discovery to comprehend all at once. When the snakes dived again, calling to her in their wordless tongue, she followed them into the submerged ruins. She understood it was a place of pilgrimage, sacred to her companions, and that they remembered its history in fragments that had been passed on from generation to generation. The pictures that arose in her mind hinted of calamitous events, heroic battles and long, golden periods of peace and prosperity. They were making her a gift of their story, she realized. She had no stories of her own but the memory of her mother and grandmother, which they accepted, she thought, with generosity.

But now the rain was slowing. She swam up to the surface and saw the sun emerge from behind the clouds. The other snakes swam sedately away from her, their farewells echoing in her mind. Until next time, she thought they said, whenever that was, and she had so many questions, so much to ask. But they were already gone, gliding over the ancient paving at the edge of the lake, disappearing into cracks and crevices in the old ruin, and into bushes, tree-holes, and other secret places. All that remained of their presence were wide ripples spreading and crisscrossing on the lake's sunlit surface. Why had they left her alone? Rainwater dripped off the neem trees; in their shade a small emerald-green frog perched on a lotus leaf. She drifted in the middle of the lake, feeling

bewildered, abandoned. Then she remembered as if from long ago, the small, heavy weight of her son on her lap, the way he tilted his chin up to her to ask for a story, his upper lip rimmed with milk. She turned and began to swim back to the lake's edge, feeling herself grow heavier and heavier, until she could feel her arms again, and her naked, muddy skin, from which the scales were already fading. Her body felt strange, awkward; at last she stood in knee-deep water, looking at her brown arms glowing in the sunshine, her mud-streaked breasts, the shiny stretchmarks on the slight, taut curve of her belly. The world swam into focus; she felt her head clear a little. She passed her tongue over her lips, and felt the slight notch on its tip that had not been there before. Behind her, under the shimmering green surface of the lake, lay the promise of that other world. She looked around and saw that her sari, blouse and undergarments were floating near her, amidst a sprinkling of harsingar flowers.

For a while she stood quietly in the water, feeling dazed and new, thinking, but not in words, or words she had known before. She knew her mother had stood thus once, filled with excitement and confusion, feeling the new life she had made stir inside her. At last she could stand inside her mother's skin and sense what she had gone through – the dilemma of choosing between two worlds, the prison she had made for herself, of love and guilt. Her brother's wistfulness; like her own son, he had been fathered by a man; he would always hear the call of his mother's kind, but could never transform, never know what it was like to turn underwater in an exquisite dance, to taste the world through his skin, to be life-giver, rain-bringer, death-lord. This new child she carried would be like her, an entity capable of existing in two worlds.

Two worlds . . . Pictures rose in her mind: the warm yellow house, the harsingar tree. She remembered the rhythms of the day, the slow course of the white cow Muniya's morning journey from house to house, the taste of fresh milk. And Kishore . . . No, she was not quite ready to leave it all behind. It was not yet time for that. She would come back to the lake again tomorrow, to begin to learn how to parcel her life between water and earth, fire and shadow, until it was time for the final leave-taking. Slowly, dazedly, she gathered her clothes and emerged from the lake. She went behind a bush and began to squeeze the water from her sari.

Her skin prickled; she sensed the gardener's presence a moment before he came around the bush. His eyes were filled with wonder and desire – he came slowly towards her as though she were a dream that would dissolve with the first stumble. She watched him curiously, without fear, still in the twilight state between her two worlds. He put trembling hands on her bare shoulders. She let him draw her close so that her breasts flattened against his wet shirt; she felt the angular roughness of his chin against her cheek. "Lady," he said, and she tasted his skin, his smell with her tongue, and remembered, with the suddenness of a thunderclap, the old fear and confusion. A bitter taste filled her mouth; as he pulled her down into the wet grass she reached up blindly and bit the side of his neck.

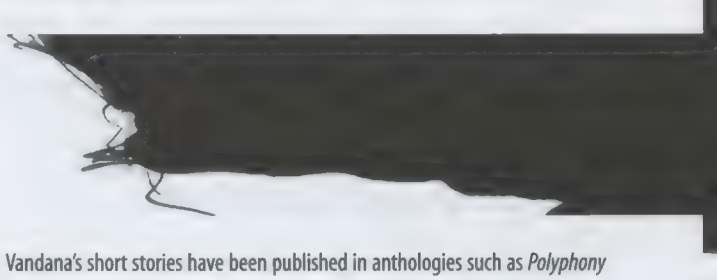
She watched him thrashing about on the ground. After he had stopped she spat and rubbed her face with her hands to try to clear her head. Then she gathered her clothes, squeezed and shook the water from them and dressed. Her hair was wet and tangled, but she managed to comb it back with her fingers and tie it into a bun. She looked once more at the gardener's still body, feeling the beginnings of a vague uneasiness.

She began to walk slowly home, looking about her like a child, letting the sights, sounds and smells wash over her: men on bicycles, ringing their bells, children splashing into rainwater puddles, shouting in their clear, shrill voices, cars all shiny and wet, honking, lurching as they negotiated pot-holes, the smell of wet earth and the vapors already rising from the moist ground, the drip of rainwater from the tree branches above her. Slowly it came back to her. The way home. It was familiar and strange all at once.

And there, meandering down the street was Muniya the cow. She caught up with the great white bovine matriarch and stretched her arm toward her, but the cow shied away from her as though stung, and began to edge away, fear in her dark eyes. Dismayed, Susheela stood there helplessly, tears welling up in her eyes. She made a small, experimental, cajoling sound, thinking of the way Kishore had looked at her last. The cow let out a breath redolent with the odor of grass and carrot ends, and let Susheela come up to her. She shuddered as Susheela stroked her back, but did not move away.

Susheela felt an urgent need now to see her son. Taking leave of Muniya she began to walk rapidly, knowing that passersby were staring at her, with her disheveled hair and sodden clothes. She had to win back her little boy, to take that look from his eyes. She would do it, she thought in the wordless tongue, with patience, with stories, but – it came back to her now with horrifying clarity: the body of the gardener in the wet grass – how to protect her family from what she had become? What would she tell them? She couldn't even begin to articulate it, she realized in terror. People on the street were talking, laughing, and they might as well have been speaking some incomprehensible foreign language, because their speech had no meaning for her.

Then, slowly, she remembered the words, and understood them. It was Naag Panchami, the Festival of Snakes, and the monsoons had arrived at last. A car went by, fast, and two glittering arcs of water rose in its wake. There was the house; the shisham trees, their round leaves glistening, the trunks dark with moisture. Through the open front window she could see her husband's profile as he waited, reading his paper, one brown hand on the sunlit sill. A picture came into her mind's eye: that brown hand scooping up earth, making a hollow like a womb for the roots of the harsingar tree, patting the soil in place. She trembled, as though a string had been plucked deep inside her. The door was open. She walked into the house as if for the first time.



Vandana's short stories have been published in anthologies such as *Polyphony* edited by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake, *Trampoline* edited by Kelly Link, *So Long Been Dreaming* edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan, and in the webzine *Strange Horizons*. One of these stories, 'The Wife', was reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror 17* in late 2004. Vandana was born and raised in India, later obtained a PhD in physics and had a brief career as a researcher. She now lives with her husband in Massachusetts.

THE DODO HAS LANDED

NOT ALL PROGRESS IS GOOD PROGRESS!

ALLEN ASHLEY

On your marks. Get set. Wait till July. Yes, London's Olympic 2012 bid has been delivered and only a few questions remain. Like, does London actually need the hassle of hosting this steroid guzzling extravaganza? Do ordinary Londoners give a shit? And why are we being expected to pay for it when we weren't even consulted?

Despite the self-serving, increasingly desperate rhetoric emanating from the government and the media establishment, London doesn't need the Olympics. Truly. We've got Tussaud's, the Tower, the London Eye . . . What we need are cheaper hotels, less crime and better foreign language skills. Anyway, we've held them before – back in 1948 as part of the post-war reconstruction. You may not remember them but it wasn't pre-history – try asking your parents or grandmother.

London hasn't even got a decent athletics stadium. Apparently, if the bid goes ahead, they're going to build one as part of a grand Lower Lea Valley redevelopment. Here's an idea: redevelop that run-down area anyway without the sports gimmick. Do something for the poor souls who live there rather than glossily pandering to NBC, Murdoch, Reebok and Mastercard. So we're being told all the time about the financial benefits accruing from hosting the event. Really? Certainly, it's already created a job for Lord Coe, replacing the too obviously Hilary Clinton-lite Barbara Cassani. How sustainable is the trumpeted employment boom? What about when the whole circus has been and gone, what then for the construction and service industries?

Financial benefits? I heard a figure of £7 billion expenditure just on security. That wouldn't be stumped up by Nike or Coca-Cola but by the average local taxpayer. I saw another figure suggesting it would cost each London council tax payer (ie me) an extra £130 a year for ten years. For what? For why? I have to work half the week for that much money – before tax. I could instead get a tout ticket to see Neil Young or even buy a flight to Bucharest. Wherever that is.

Now, did I blink the mist out of my eyes and somehow miss the consultation about whether we want to be financially punished for the dubious privilege of hosting this over-hyped sweatfest? And as local amenities like York Hall, Brockwell Lido and my old school playing field Hilton Avenue N12 have been either left to fester or sold off to Wimpey Homes for yuppie flats, what's going to happen to the 'wonderful' new sports facilities a few years down the line? Have we learned nothing from the Millennium Dome debacle?

Timing is crucial in the staging of major sports events. The All England Tennis Championships (colloquially 'Wimbledon') are held during the last week of June and the first week of July. You don't see Henman and the Williams sisters going head to head with Arsene Wenger's Gooners.

Suppose we hold the Olympics and nobody watches: because we don't have medal chances; because it's a sport or a discipline which nobody practises in this country; because – judging by football/concert/theatre tickets – the seats are vastly overpriced. Because the transport links are so shit – and that proposed monorail will carry a few hundred, not fifty-odd thousand. Because people would rather stay at home and watch football/Big Brother/You've Been Celebrity Weak Link Wife Swapped. Or what if all the vaguely watchable action – javelin, 4x100m relay – gets pushed back to midnight or two in the morning so that it's conveniently prime time for the sponsors on New York television? How the hell are crowds supposed to get home? But never mind the paying punters – as Sky's perpetual messing with Premiership fixtures shows, they're just background atmosphere. Anyway, would I want to sit in an aircraft hangar watching some steroid snorting Arnie lookalike lifting up big metal wheels? I could go to Kwikfit for that!

Part of the problem is that athletics in Britain is still fairly low profile. Ask me to name current GB athletes and I'll go Kelly Holmes, Matthew Pinsent, Paula 'Fainted in the heat' Radcliffe, er . . . Daley Thompson? Sally Gunnell? Lots of reasons have been put forward such as the selling off of school sports fields by successive governments and the apparent modern youth 'obesity timebomb'. The significance of role models for kids cannot be dismissed. Michael Owen idolised Gary Lineker. Now all the kids walk around with Owen, Beckham or Rooney on their England shirts and kick a ball/car windscreen/passer by whenever they can. I think it was Tessa Jowell – then Culture Secretary, now Minister with

Have we learned nothing from the Millennium Dome debacle?

Portfolio for Gambling – who suggested we want to develop a new breed of Olympic champions. Are you sure? Shouldn't the aim be to get more people actively engaged in sports participation?

I seriously doubt that GB will ever have a 'new breed'. What's cooler and gets more notice? Running a race and getting really red faced and breathless or strolling around in a hoodie spraying your 'tag' on every available wall and parked-up tube train?

The Sydney 2000 Olympics are considered to have been a huge success – Kylie Minogue singing, that Australian aborigine girl winning some race or other – but the residents of that city are still paying for the staging of the games. Whenever the telly does a *vox pop* have a look and see who's in favour of the games. I'll tell you – schoolchildren (take a look at the singles chart to see how poorly formed their tastes and opinions are), students (probably still pissed on cheap vodka from two nights ago) and tourists (fuck 'em and their opinions – they'll be back home in a couple of weeks). The point is that none of this lot pays council tax, therefore they can afford to be in favour of the games – it's a free show for them.

Another annoying aspect is how the establishment has got so firmly behind the push for London's bid. London Transport has wasted its income from my tube fares on printing up leaflets proclaiming 'Back the Bid'. The Evening Standard and various other rags flaunt their support. Well, pontificating on a sports event is piss easy journalism: you don't have to search out the news story just turn up ahead of the starting pistol and write down the scores. But the whole thing has got a 'Holier than thou' stink about it, 'We're backing the Olympics, why aren't you?'. Spare any change, guv? About £14 billion would help.

Lastly, here's a radical idea that I don't think has been mooted before. The Olympics originated in Greece. They've built new stadia and roads. It's 'come home'. So, let's hold it in Greece *every* four years. After all, you wouldn't expect the English FA Cup Final to be held outside England, would you? Oh yeah, you would actually . . .

RUNNING ON TWO LEGS

EUGIE FOSTER

illustrated by KELLY DYSON

My mother used to tell stories of how I talked to animals when I was a little girl. And then she'd laugh when she described how indignant I got because no one believed they talked back.

I don't remember much of that period of my life. There were a lot of hospitals – white rooms, other pale children next to me, all of us with clear IV tubes taped to our parchment paper skin – and doctors, smiling men with haunted eyes that they tried so hard to keep us from seeing. That's mostly what I remember.

And then came the miraculous words 'in remission'. I remember those, and the tears on my mother's face when the doctor said them, for once without the not-quite-hidden anguish in his eyes. Everything was better after that. After those words I remember summer days spent grubby and exhausted in the old abandoned shack behind our house. No longer did I keep company with hospital wraiths, but rather with neighborhood kids who had experienced no greater hurt than a scraped knee or a bruised shin; kids who'd never had to listen to their parents sob just outside their door, thinking you couldn't hear them; and kids who had no memory of being so sick that even the feel of a blanket was unbearable agony.

I think I stopped talking to animals then. Or maybe I just had better things to do than listen to the birds chattering at my window or the squirrels quarrelling in the tree outside.

But I heard them again today.

"Man chicks pelted my nest," I heard through the rolled-down window of our old Honda Civic as we pulled into the parking lot of the clinic.

"Did you say something?" I asked my husband.

Kevin shook his head. He needed a haircut. The waves in his hair were turning into frizzy curls in the Georgia heat. I mourned the Civic's air conditioner, its cooling breeze a memory of more prosperous days.

"Time to build again," I heard. And I recognized the voice – a shrill, helium babble, a tone I hadn't heard in over two decades. I looked up, and sure enough, I saw the muted berry-red breast of a she-robin hopping on a branch beside the tattered remains of a nest. Another bird, a brown one with white shoulders, cocked its head sympathetically.

That's when I knew. Even before I saw the doctor – a woman this time, but still with the same cheery smile that couldn't conceal the sorrow that was a requisite of her job – I knew.

Kevin held my hand in reception as we waited to be called. They didn't keep us stewing for long. Maybe when the results are bad, they try to cut you a break on the limbo time spent half bored, half terrified amongst the screaming children and the old issues of *People* and *National Geographic*.

Dr Graykin didn't bother with small talk; she never did. "The results of your biopsy came back, Ginny. I'm afraid it's not good. The tests showed a malignancy."

I expected to feel horrified, or at the very least, afraid. But instead, all I could think of were the words of the robin. "Time to build again." How did birds mark time?

It was Kevin who reacted. "Cancer?" The word was a gasp, a choked whisper.

"I'm afraid so."

"What are our options?" he said.

Our options. Sometimes I got mad at Kevin when he inadvertently left my name off memberships he signed us up for – like the Paperback Book club, or the Music of the Month club. For that matter, the cable was still only in his name. But he remembered this time.

"I'd recommend a rigorous course of chemotherapy," Dr Graykin said. "I'm afraid this is a fairly aggressive form of cancer. And because of the nature of the tumor, I believe a hysterectomy will be necessary. The last set of x-rays showed another mass already forming. Complete removal of the impacted organs will give us the best chance of beating this."

Now Dr Graykin was included in my prognosis. Give *us* the best chance, she'd said.

"What are my odds?" With that one word: *my*, I let the illusion slip. It crumbled to dust like brittle flower husks in winter, exposing me to what the doctor and my husband had been trying to shield me from. But this was my fight and my sickness, mine and mine alone. In the end, it'd be me vomiting my insides out from the chemo, too weak to even raise a hand to brush the hair out of my eyes. No matter how supportive Kevin was, or how solicitous Dr Graykin, they couldn't carry that for me.

"I'd say pretty good," Dr Graykin said. "I think we've caught it early enough. Maybe seven out of ten women can expect to push it into remission, assuming you act decisively now."

Seven out of ten. My future was laid out, reduced to a number game of statistics and uncertainty.

I let Kevin make the follow-up appointments with the receptionist, scheduling when I would have the poisons pumped into my veins to kill the cells that had turned against me, setting the date for when they'd excise the organs that were killing me like Trojan horse invaders from the inside.

Back in the car, I sat listening to the birds.

"Wind's changing. Thunderstorm flying in on cloud wings," I heard.

I'd never learned what the birds indigenous to Georgia were, their feather patterns or migratory habits. But I knew what this one would look like from his voice. He'd be one of those little brownish-gray birds that dive at crows to scare them away from their nests. It always impressed me how fearless they were, attacking other birds that were two, sometimes three times larger.

Kevin stared into space behind the wheel. The keys dangled from his fingers, idle.

"Rain shoos worms out," the bird said.

"We'll get through this," Kevin finally said. "But no kids on top of everything else . . . " His words dribbled away, and between us, silence dug its fingernails in.

No kids. After the hysterectomy I wouldn't be able to experience the wonder of growing a new life inside of me. I'd never feel a tiny person develop within me nor go through the process of expelling it forth in a gush of agony and hope. I wondered why I didn't grieve, why I didn't mourn for the children of my womb that I'd never have. But I felt distant, detached.

"Full gullet follows the rains," the bird chirped.

The Civic's motor revved as Kevin turned the key in the ignition, drowning out the bird's voice.

At home, Kevin fidgeted. I felt sorry for him. He didn't know what to do with himself. I wasn't reacting the way the tragedy-struck heroines on television did; I wasn't crying or shouting or throwing things. He was waiting to be my rock, my solace, and I just sat in the kitchen, staring out the window.

"You should go back to work," I said.

"I can't leave you alone at a time like this."

"We can't afford for you to lose your job." The words *and your health insurance* were left unspoken, but I knew both of us were thinking them. "I'll be fine."

I felt him at my shoulder, reaching out to comfort me. "You sure?"

I moved away, knew it when his hand fell back. "It's just cancer. I beat the odds once. I can do it again."

It was false bravado, but Kevin needed to hear it. It allowed him to gather up his briefcase and his keys and drive away from me.

And besides, I really wasn't alone. I waited until I could no longer hear our old car sputtering down the road before I went out to the host of voices I knew were in our backyard.

Our yard is large and fenced in. I think the previous owners had a dog. The fence is old and there are gaps in it large enough to admit cats, rabbits, squirrels, and once I saw a raccoon from the kitchen window. It's an unkempt area, our big backyard. Neither Kevin nor I enjoy yard work and the weeds had grown roughshod through the grass. Unidentifiable greenery sprouted tiny white flowers, like miniature daisies, cascading over a failing landscaped bush that sagged from the invader's weight. Thin, tall trees – fruit trees, evergreens, and shrubs – shaded the far corner; long-dead tree trunks intermingled with the quick. The evergreens spewed a profusion of pinecones year round, making mowing a risk-fraught undertaking; the flora itself endorsed our *laissez-faire* grounds keeping.

I sat on the old wooden bench; its white paint, slashed into streamers by time, revealed the dry, cracked wood beneath, and I listened.

"Got a seed? Got a seed?" trilled from the leaf-canopy overhead.

"Sky fly high."

"The sun. Lookit the sun!"

Then I heard a non-avian speaker. "Wanna bite," it said. It was a nasal voice; it reminded me of a young Jimmy Durante.

"No bite." That voice also had a nasal drone to it, but it was seasoned by maturity.

Out of the cover of a riotously blooming weed-shrub, a soft-furred black face pushed through, crowned with a cap of white. Small black ears and India-ink eyes swiveled to regard me. A round barrel body with two broad, white stripes down the back trundled out. Behind her, a miniature copy tagged at her heels. The ripe aroma of unwashed socks wafted over me.

They say that a skunk out during the day must be rabid, but I knew these two weren't. Rabid animals don't exude patient resignation, or, in the case of Junior, unbridled elation. Another urban wilderness myth debunked, I guess.

Mama Skunk trotted up to me, the size of a small housecat but with that sweeping tail no cat possessed. I breathed through my mouth and hoped that Junior wasn't trigger-happy. Mama didn't seem to notice my poised anxiety, or if she did, she didn't comment on it.

"Wanna bite," Junior said.

"No bite," Mama repeated. She sat down, not two steps from my bench; her hind legs sprawled out on either side of her.

I began to relax. The smell, though not agreeable, wasn't aggressively offensive, not much worse than a rain-drenched German Shepherd.

With great dignity, she scratched at a spot behind her ear – one hind leg a blur of movement. "Teeth on this one comin' in," she said. "Needs to set 'em in everything he sniffs."

To illustrate, Junior launched himself at Mama's hindquarters and sunk his gleaming white teeth into her haunches.

Mama gave a weary sigh. "Small ones." While Junior worried at her, she gazed up at me. "Third of the year, he is. First daughter and second and fourth sons crushed by four-wheels on the road."

"I'm sorry."

She swiped at Junior with a paw. It dislodged him momentarily. "My second breeding season. First was an only daughter. Owl took her. Takes a lot out, raising small ones and watching them die."

"I'm sorry," I repeated. I wasn't sure what else to say.

"One more season in me, I think. Then I'm done. No more egg crunch in my teeth or juicy caterpillar fur sticky on my tongue." She hissed at Junior as he dug his baby fangs into her leg. "No bite!"

"Wanna bite."

Mama snatched Junior up by the scruff of his neck and snapped her head sharply to the side. "No bite!"

"No bite," Junior squeaked, hanging from her mouth.

Mama released him and Junior sprang at her back, chewing at the thick fur there. She nodded to me, a single bob of her nose, and turned to go. Junior tumbled off in a sprawl of oversized paws and bushy tail, and scampered after her.

"If small ones could bite the moon, they would," she called over her shoulder. "But no one wants a chewed-up moon."

Bemused, I watched them flatten themselves under my fence, the flags of their tails disappearing beneath it. I made a mental note to put out a tray of snacks – leftovers from dinner, perhaps – for Mama and Junior tonight.

A flash of violet caught my eye as a blue jay fluttered onto one of our wild cherry trees. "Beware the wind!" he called.

"I'm watching. I'm watching," another voice replied.

I scanned the branches but couldn't see this newcomer. From the sharpness of the tone, I was betting it was a woodpecker, but wasn't sure.

"Won't rustle my nest," the maybe-woodpecker chirped. "Go fly."

The blue jay flitted away.

"Gotta build for a storm," the unseen bird said. "But sometimes blown down anyway. The sun's out now. Lookit! Lookit!"

Another voice joined in and a chorus of *Lookit*s ensued.

I listened to the birds discuss the weather until the labored engine of the Civic announced my husband's return.

Kevin tossed his briefcase into a chair and his keys onto the table as I started some rice boiling for dinner.

"I sat in the backyard this afternoon," I said. "I've decided I like the overgrown look. Some of the weeds are prettier than the landscaped flowers."

"I can get the mower out of the tool shed this weekend."

"No, I'm serious. I like it." I rinsed off a stalk of bok choy and began chopping it into chunks. The stem and the browning parts I deposited into a bowl. Mama and Junior Skunk would appreciate the tidbits.

"Ginny, did you call my folks with the news yet?"

I tossed a bundle of bean sprouts into the strainer and sent a cascade of water over them. "No. I don't really know what to say to them." I picked out several choice sprouts and set them in the same bowl as the bok choy stem.

"Want me to do it?"

I didn't look up from the carrots and parsnips on the cutting board. "Would you?" I made it a game, seeing how evenly I could chop them.

While Kevin dialed, I poured oil into the wok and dropped in some diced green onion and teriyaki sauce to simmer.

Outside, I saw wings flash in the treetops.

"Hi, Mom. Ginny and I got word back from her biopsy today – "

I concentrated on making dinner: mushrooms for us, mushrooms in the skunk bowl, eggplant for us, eggplant in the bowl.

Even across the room, with the headset against Kevin's ear, I could hear his mother sobbing. Part of it, most of it probably, was for me. But I was sure a little bit was for them too. From the moment we'd announced our engagement, his parents, especially his mother, had talked about grandchildren. I felt like I was shirking them by having Kevin break the bad news, but on the other hand, I knew the phone call would be good for him. His mother was reacting the way I should have, dissolving into tears and railing at fate. He spoke in soothing tones, the epitome of tender consolation. It gave him something to focus on, something to do.

The tang of cooking bell peppers suffused with curry and cinnamon drifted from the wok and permeated the kitchen. I dumped in the sprouts and turned down the heat.

"Dinner's just about ready," I said.

Kevin nodded and began the process of extracting himself from the phone. He was reluctant, but I heard him address his father. Undoubtedly my dad-in-law had taken over comforting Kevin's mother.

I poured us some iced tea out of the refrigerator as he replaced the headset onto the cradle.

Kevin watched me eat; I could feel his eyes, over the bottle of soy sauce, following me as I forked up mouthfuls of rice and vegetables.

"I spent today thinking," I said.

Kevin put down his fork, his food untouched. "About what?"

I'd forgotten to toss some peanuts into the stir-fry. Peanuts were one of Kevin's favorites. "The chemotherapy, the surgery," I said. "I remember what chemo was like when I was a kid. I remember thinking that letting the leukemia have me would've been better."

The silence stretched. The sound of my own teeth crunching through celery and carrots was deafening.

"Did you ever think how unnatural it is, going through all that medical rigmarole to extend our lives?" I continued. "When wild animals get sick, they don't stress it, don't claw for those extra few weeks or months or years. They just accept it. Maybe it's better that way."

Kevin made a sound; I don't think it was a word. He stared at me, and I had to look away. I couldn't handle the confused hurt, stark on his face, that I'd glimpsed.

I stood up with my half-eaten plate of food and dumped it and the bowl of vegetable leavings onto a plate. The back door's unoiled hinges creaked as I wrenched it open.

Kevin didn't follow me. I hadn't expected him to.

I'd just unlatched the screen door when I heard the scream.

"No! Not me! Aii!"

I rushed out and saw a calico tabby cat examining a tuft of gray fur between its paws. I recognized the cat as one of the strays that roamed the neighborhood from the jagged scar across its nose. As I watched, the cat opened the trap of its claws and the animal leapt free. It was tiny – a mouse, or a vole maybe.

"Run," the cat growled.

The terrified little creature scampered towards me. I didn't think it was seeking me out; it was just running away from the cat. It screamed, high pitched and inarticulate.

I took a step forward but the cat was faster. It pounced and the tiny animal's screams ended, cut off. I heard the snap of fragile bones shattering between sharp teeth.

My headlong rush petered out before the momentum could build beyond the first adrenalin jolt. It had all happened too quickly.

The tabby spat out the mouse-vole and prodded the now-limp body. His golden eyes gleamed in the twilight. "Fought well, small warm fur," he said. "Tried to bite me. Such small fangs. Mine are much finer." He shook his paws at the dead rodent and turned his back to it. "It's still now."

"Aren't you at least going to eat it?" I said.

The cat's tail flicked back and forth like a plump, furry serpent. "Not hungry."

"Then why'd you kill it if you aren't going to eat it?" Indignation made my voice harsh.

Yellow-slitted eyes met mine. "It was there."

Before I could reply, he bounded across my yard, scaled the fence in a single prodigious leap, and was gone.

I set the plate of food down, half surprised to still find it in my hands, and went over to the pathetic corpse in the overgrown grass. A trickle of blood spattered a soft-muzzled face, plastering the fur around its head and neck. It was still warm. I wondered if I ought to bury it.

Still undecided, I stood up. Movement from above caught my attention. Against the shading of the darkening lavender sky, I saw silhouettes flit and flutter. Voices drifted to me, excited and high-pitched.

"There!"

"Caught it."

"Mine."

"Listen."

Bats. Little brown ones out in the dusk, hunting insects. Such chaotic energy, a wild dance in the sky. And not once did a dancer misstep; they all seemed to know the exact cadence and meter of their frenetic waltz. I watched them dive and careen above me until it grew too dark to see.

"Warm blood is sweeter, but tonight it is cold." The speaker's voice was precise, a softly calculating presence. An owl.

I wouldn't have to dig a grave for the tiny dead thing in my yard. I retreated, returning to the voice-free refuge of my kitchen.

It was deserted.

The door to Kevin's den was closed, but when I knocked on it, the knob turned and the door swung open as though he'd been waiting for me.

He hadn't changed out of his work clothes; his shirt was wrinkled and his tie loose and askew around his neck. I couldn't meet his eyes – familiar soft blue eyes that crinkled in laughter at our private jokes, ones that no one else would understand. Those eyes would hold anguish, I knew, pain I had caused. There might be tears in them if I looked up. I stared at his chin.

"I didn't write down when my appointments were," I said. "Do you still have the cards the receptionist gave you?"

I let myself peek after all. Yes, blue eyes the color of the evening sky, still pained, but also relieved. I'd given him back something to hope for.

I avoided the outdoors after that. I kept the windows closed and the radio or television, or both, turned up to drown out even the hint of wilderness voices. Trips to the hospital for the start of my chemotherapy were made with the car radio blaring and culminated in a hasty, unseeing, unhearing dash from parking lot to foyer.

The drugs made me tired and everything I ate became seasoned by flakes of rust. But the hint of nausea I felt when I watched the clear solution dripping into my arm during the first treatment didn't manifest beyond a suggestion of misery. I was thankful for that.

Days disappeared, unmarked and unremembered while the poisons did their work. Then came the one scribbled on my calendar by Kevin, like a birthday or anniversary.

He drove us to the hospital and hovered nearby as the nurses and interns took charge of me. In hospitals, nobody's clothing fits properly. Doctors flurried by, the wings of their white lab coats and smocks loose in their wakes. Fellow patients slouched or reclined under a stratum of blankets and hospital gowns. And my attendants' slate blue scrubs transformed them into anonymous, androgynous drones that buzzed and twittered about me. When they donned their facemasks, the illusion was complete – featureless, genderless eunuchs, all of them. In my baggy hospital garb, I joined their fellowship. But they could take off their uniforms and become people again. I, on the other hand, would be a true eunuch after today, hollowed out and sterile.

I watched as one of them tightened a tourniquet on my arm and slid a shining needle into the faintly pulsing vein in the crook of my elbow. I dutifully counted down from ten,

and embraced the darkness that crowded the edges of the room when I hit four.

Three. Two. One.

Someone had erected a nest of cotton balls and gauze in my mouth and hastily dismantled it while I slept. I was left with the taste of desiccated foundation.

I opened my eyes and immediately closed them again. Surely the world was not supposed to be a dizzying slash of color and light?

"Ginny?" I recognized Kevin's voice. "I saw her open her eyes, doctor."

"She should be coming out of the anesthesia," Dr Graykin said. "It can be disorienting."

I remembered now. I had been un-womaned in the limbo of three numbers, carved up and sewn back together again. "I'm awake," I said. Although it didn't sound right, more like "Mm, wwm." I tried again. "I'm here." I squinted my eyes open, relieved to discover that the room wasn't still canting sideways.

I felt Kevin's fingers against my hand, felt the brush of his lips on my forehead. "How're you feeling?"

"I wouldn't nominate today as one of my all-time favorites," I mumbled.

"You'll probably be sore for a while," Dr Graykin said. "A week, at least. You'll need to take it very easy."

I had been blissfully oblivious of my body until I heard the word *sore*. Then I became aware of a deep ache running through me. Each breath pulled at low parts of me that were unhappy and eager to complain. My arm throbbed where the IV line punctured it, tethering me to a jellyfish-flaccid bag.

"The procedure went smoothly," Dr Graykin continued. "We were able to visualize the tumor in its entirety."

"Oh. Good."

"You should rest now. Let the nurse on duty know if you need anything." Dr Graykin patted my sheet-shrouded leg and was gone in a whirl of white before I could finish mouthing a thank you.

Kevin handed me a tastefully cheery, pink envelope. I produced the obligatory smile at the cuter-than-cute bunny on the cover of the card. The inside read '*Hopping* you get well soon!'

"Thanks, honey." The words sounded dismal, even to me.

Kevin leaned over and brushed his lips against my cheek.

I closed my eyes.

"Try to get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay. Bye."

That night, alone in my hospital bed, I dreamed that I was Prometheus, chained to the bench in my yard while crows picked at me, tearing out my ovaries and uterus with their sharp beaks and crying "Lookit! Lookit!"

I didn't need a psychoanalyst to interpret it.

I woke with the curtains of my room just beginning to turn from a colorless gray to a pale dandelion-buff. Birds would be singing outside, announcing the dawn. I couldn't hear them, and suddenly I wanted to.

I swung my legs over the edge of my bed, careful not to tangle my IV line, and lurched the two steps to the window. My legs were uncooperative, intent upon tripping me up. The pain intensified and I staggered against the window casing. My eyes felt scalded, like a handful of salt had been tossed into them. I reached a hand up and discovered that my face was wet. Tears. Why was I crying? Weeping, standing, the window, it was too much for me to manage. My legs gave way and I crumpled, taking the metal tree that held my now-empty IV bag with me. Pain erupted through me and I couldn't stop myself from crying out.

The soft shushing of rubber-soled shoes on tile pattered to my door. The door opened; light enveloped me.

"Oh my goodness! Mrs Broward, what are you doing?" It was the night nurse.

"The w-window," I sobbed. "I j-just wanted to open the window."

She righted the IV stand and half-lifted me to my feet. The tears wouldn't stop and each time I hiccupped, another spear of pain tore through my body. I no longer felt distressed at the closed window; I just felt ridiculous.

"There, there, Mrs Broward." The nurse settled me back into bed, handed me a tissue, and checked my bandages.

My nose dripped disgustingly. Blowing it hurt. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"It's the hormones and all the stress from the operation. It's perfectly normal." She tucked the blankets in around me. "Comfy?"

I nodded. My eyelids were heavy again, weighted by hot coins.

"Right then. Just hit the red button if you need me."

"Okay," I mumbled. The nurse's face grew hazy and the edges of the room softened around me.

She patted my hand. "Henry's coming 'round today. I'll make sure he swings by here first thing. He's good at getting a grin. Smiling is its own medicine."

I don't remember her leaving. When I opened my eyes again, the curtains were a radiant canary-yellow. A hollow rapping echoed from my door. It was that sound which had awakened me.

"Come in."

The door opened a crack and a man's face peered around the edge. It was an unobtrusive face; creases at the eyes and forehead spoke of time spent in the sun. He wasn't a doctor; there was too much buoyancy in his eyes.

"Did I wake you?" he said. "Judy, the nurse, told me I should come by."

Memories of a first light conversation filtered into my consciousness. I struggled to sit up. "Are you Henry?"

The man pushed the door wide. "Actually, my name's Dave. But Henry's with me."

I heard a soft clicking, like a strand of pearls being coiled together. A tawny yellow and black, indisputably canine muzzle, poked around my door. The head, level with Dave's thigh, was long and graceful atop a brindle-shaded neck. Bright brown eyes peered up at me while a wide mouth lolled open in a doggie smile. It was canine nails on hospital tile that had clacked and clattered so.

"This is Henry," Dave said.

"Oh." I had thought that Henry would be a therapist or a psychiatrist.

"You're not allergic or anything, are you?" Dave said.

"No. Not at all."

Henry's ears flipped forward. "Hi," he said. "Pleased to meetcha. Very happy to. Yup."

"Henry's a greyhound rescue from a track in Florida," Dave said. He didn't react to Henry's words, but then I hadn't expected him to. "We visit the hospital every Wednesday. Judy said you needed some company?"

"Come in."

Dave led Henry to the side of my bed. I noticed something. "Hey, you've only got three legs."

"I know. I know," Henry said. "My leg was sick. They cut it off."

"Bone cancer," Dave said. "We caught it in time, but that was pretty much the end of his racing days."

"Good as new. Better. Better," Henry said. "Doesn't hurt.

Can't race as fast as I used to. Boy, I really could go when I was a pup, but I can still get the wind buzzing through my ears. I like running. I'd run with two legs if I had to. Sorry. No offense."

I smiled. The curve of my lips felt alien to me, like I hadn't smiled in a very long time. I reached out to stroke the dog's head. His short fur was warm, like thick velvet beneath my fingers.

"Pet my ears," he said. "My ears. Everyone likes my ears."

So I stroked the felt and sateen of his pale yellow ears.

"Y'know," he said. "Listen up here. Listen. It doesn't matter how many legs you got. The important thing is the running. That's what I always say."

It was soothing, just petting Henry. Some of the tension, a bit of the anxiety, leaked away as I ran my fingers through his coat.

Dave ruffled the dog's head. "Hey, I have to take Henry to the kid's ward now. He's got a date with a certain little boy who's very punctuality oriented. If you like, I can swing by afterwards. Maybe let you and Henry have some quality one-on-one time?"

"That's not necessary. My husband will be in soon to take me home. But I'm glad you both came by." I gave Henry a last pat. "Thank you, Henry."

"My pleasure. You're welcome. Any time."

"And you too, Dave."

"Hey, I'm just the transportation. I know who the real star of the show is." Dave grinned down at the dog. "Ready to go, fellah? Rickie's waiting for you."

"Yeah. Yeah. Gotta go see Rickie. Yup," Henry said. "Nice to metcha, lady. Glad to make your acquaintance. See you around."

Kevin arrived while the day nurse – a slender, pinch-faced woman with brusque manners but a soothing voice – was serving me a tray of red Jell-o, oatmeal, and toast.

I pushed the unappetizing meal away. "Hi."

"Hi back. How're you doing?"

"Not too bad," I said.

"Has Dr Graykin been by yet?"

As though he'd conjured her, she appeared at his elbow. "Good morning, Ginny. Did you sleep okay?"

"More or less."

She performed a cursory check of my vitals – heartbeat, blood pressure, temperature – and oversaw the removal of the IV umbilicus before declaring me sound. It was such a relief feeling the plastic tube slide out of my arm. I had spent more time than anyone should have to endure, violated by a slender hose piping medicines and nutrients through my veins.

The pinched-faced nurse helped me dress into proper clothes before bundling me into a wheelchair for my exodus to the hospital's patient drive.

Kevin acted as though I was a sandcastle at high tide. He hovered over me, unhappy when I wouldn't let him bodily carry me from the car into the house. But he didn't press me either, as though he were afraid that I would melt away at a strong word.

"Do you need anything? Want me to make you a sandwich?"

"I'm not hungry."

"The doctor said you should eat something. I can heat up some soup. Maybe with some bread and butter?"

"No, really. They fed me at the hospital."

"You didn't eat it."

"Really, I'm fine. I just want to lie down."

"Of course. After we get you tucked in I can bring you something light to snack on. Maybe some fruit?"

My patience splintered. "Kevin, having my reproductive organs surgically extracted did not create a gaping hole that needs stuffing. And even if it did, I hardly think food would be an adequate substitute for what I've lost unless you were thinking of cramming that fruit into me from a different orifice than my mouth."

I pushed past him and stomped upstairs, trying not to flinch when the sudden movements caused my insides to twang and bite. I wanted to bang the bedroom door shut, but I managed to cling to the last threads of civility and merely shut it.

I barely had the strength to kick off my shoes before falling into the neatly made-up bed. The last thing I saw before my eyelids slammed shut was that the window overlooking our yard was open.

Crying woke me. At first, I thought it was Kevin, but it wasn't his throat that made those heartbroken, pitiful wails. It was dark outside, but it was only a little after noon, far too early for sunset. Somber gray clouds, heavy with rain and the promise of thunder, enveloped the horizon.

Peering out the window, I realized that the sounds were coming from the yard. Without bothering to slip my shoes on, I padded to the door. Nothing stirred inside the house as I made my way through it, blinking in the false twilight.

The grass was cool under my bare feet. Edges of crabgrass like crinkly knives slashed my ankles. I nearly tripped over a white plate, hidden by overgrown weeds. It was the licked-clean plate of food I had set out an uncountable number of days ago.

The noise was coming from the tool shed nestled in the furthest recesses of our yard where we kept the neglected lawn mower and other underutilized paraphernalia.

The door squealed as I pulled it open; the hinges were too rust-encumbered to perform smoothly. The stench of recently-fired skunk musk assailed me. No, it wasn't a *stench*; that word didn't do it justice. Fresh skunk is a transcendental state, an experience more profound than anything encompassed by as simple a sense as smell. My eyes streaked with tears and I struggled not to retch, knowing that to do so would require me to take another breath.

Through the blur of my tear-filled eyes, I saw a small black and white bundle of fury charging me. His tail stood up straight behind him, the long hairs bristling out like a Christmas tree. He was puffed up, standing on his toes to appear as large as possible. It was Junior.

"Go 'way!" he shrilled in his Jimmy Durante voice.

"Don't shoot," I whispered, half-choked. "I'm going away, see?"

At the sound of my voice, he stopped mid-charge. His tail drooped and he deflated. "Wait. Need help," he said.

I tried breathing through my mouth, but I could still smell the musk. When I inhaled, my tongue and the back of my throat became swathed with a foul, oily coating.

"What's the matter?" I gasped.

"Mama poofed someone. I run away. She won't wake up."

"She was attacked?"

"Just here. Lookie."

A still puddle of black and white lay in the shadows. It was Mama Skunk. She was dead, her neck snapped.

"Oh, Junior, I'm so sorry. Your mother's not waking up."

Junior butted and pawed at her, whining and snuffling forlornly.

"What happened?" No sane animal would tangle with a skunk. And obviously Mama had got in a shot. For her assailant to have managed to snap her neck after being hit, I couldn't fathom it.

"Cat," Junior said. "All scarred up. No sniffer."

And I remembered the calico cat, the one that had killed the mouse-vole.

Junior's liquid black eyes gazed up at me. "Lonesome," he whimpered. "Scared." He began to cry, small snuffling noises both like and unlike a weeping human child.

"I'm sorry," I said again. The words felt inadequate. "Are you hungry? You're probably hungry. Let me get you something to eat." I reminded myself of Kevin, an uncomfortable sensation.

"Leaving me? Come back?"

"I'll be right back. Stay here."

The air was fresher outside; I inhaled with relief. The first droplets of rain plunked on my arms and shoulders.

Kevin had made soup, after all. I found a large Tupperware bowl in the refrigerator filled with some cream-based concoction. It would have milk in it, and vegetables, maybe cheese. I ladled up a bowlful and debated whether I needed to microwave it for Junior. But no, I was still inundated by the residue of Mama Skunk's last stand. The less time I spent in the house, the less exhaustive the fumigation efforts would have to be. I hoped.

I was on my way out the door when I heard Junior's screams. They were high-pitched and shrill, inhuman. The bowl shattered on the kitchen linoleum as I ran out. Tendrils of sizzling pain oscillated from my nether regions up through my chest in a pulsating rhythm. I doubted whether Dr Graykin would classify sprinting as 'taking it very easy'. I caught my breath, and instantly gagged. I'd thought that the stink couldn't possibly get any worse. A fresh infusion of skunk spray proved me wrong.

I tried to ignore the raindrops now hammering down from above, but they trickled into my eyes and made the grass slick. The throbbing turned into a persistent flare of pain as I slid and stumbled through our yard. Despite the toxic miasma that hovered around the tool shed, I rushed in.

The relief from the rain vied with a wave of nausea from the redoubled aura of skunk. In the storm's gloom, the shed was pitch.

I pushed the door wide. A single strobe of lightning splashed whiteness and shadows in with the rain. In the moment of washed-out over brilliance, I saw Junior, huddled in the scant shelter of the mower where it leaned against the wall. The lightning framed the calico cat in mid-leap as it sprang.

Blinded again, but trusting in the afterimage memory, I dove.

"Don't shoot!" I shouted at Junior.

My hand closed over a screeching, furious ball of teeth and claws. The cat sank its fangs in but I didn't let go. Red-hot wires scored my wrist and I felt teeth grate against bone in my palm.

Another slash of lightning lit the shed. I wrestled the scratching, biting demon to the dust-covered crate that housed moldering copies of Kevin's old comic books and magazines. I threw the cat in, slammed the lid shut, and latched it.

My hands and arms felt like I'd set them on fire. More worrisome, I felt wetness trickling down my side through the bandages. "Junior?" I panted. "Where are you?"

"Mama?" I felt a cold nose nudge my ankle. "Mama?"

I kneeled, doing my best not to breathe, and picked Junior up with my smarting arms. "You okay?"

He immediately nestled into me, snuffling at my face. It felt good, his warm, soft body snug against me.

"Oh my God!" Kevin exclaimed behind me. I turned and was blinded by a flashlight beam.

Junior squawked and tried to burrow under my arm.

Kevin repositioned the light so it no longer blazed into my eyes. I could imagine the picture I presented. I was drenched, barefoot, my hands and arms scored and bleeding, rank with musk, and cuddling a baby skunk. But Kevin surprised me. After only the shortest of explanations, he helped me and Junior back to the house, phoned animal control to collect the cat I had trapped in the shed, and took charge of Junior, setting him up with a bowl of soup and a blanket-lined box in the spare bathroom.

"We're adopting a skunk, huh?" He got out the peroxide and began dabbing at my bites and scratches. "Y'know, if you wanted a baby substitute, I would've thought a puppy or cat or something would've been less problematic than a skunk." He glanced up at me as he said it, his tone teasing and light. When I didn't rebuff him, he smiled shyly. "So, uh, you think we can get him de-scented?"

The rueful expression on his face made me giggle. When was the last time I had giggled? I couldn't remember. I took his fingers in mine and winced when they brushed against my wounds.

"Kevin, I'm sorry about how I've behaved," I said. "It's just, I'm so scared all the time, I don't – "

He pulled me close and rested his chin on top of my head. "I know, honey. It's okay. I'll always love you, no matter what. Kids or no kids, even if you decide you need to adopt stray skunks and get into fights with alley cats, I'll still love you."

I laughed and something rigid that I'd been holding tight inside me dissolved away. The laughter metamorphosed unexpectedly into tears, great gasping sobs that swelled until I was helpless to stop them. I felt my knees fold. I would have fallen, but Kevin caught me. He held me in his arms as I cried, stroked my hair as I wept, my body wracked with tremor after tremor. I clung to him, my rock after all.

People look at us funny when I tell them we have a skunk living with us.

Kevin drew the line at Junior sleeping in bed with us. But when he's at work, Junior usually curls up with me on the couch for long skunk naps. He follows me around as I tend the new vegetable garden in our backyard and gets underfoot as often as he can. When the chemotherapy made my hair fall out, his antics lured me away from fixating on the freakish apparition in my mirror. And when I feel too wrung out by the drugs to get out of bed, he drags all the covers off me, puffing and straining to haul the mass of blankets away. I laugh and find I *can* get up.

The backyard has acquired some strange attraction to four-legged and feathered types. It's especially the sick or the scared or the lonely that come to me. Cats thrown out of car windows, puppies dumped by the roadside, they find their way here and tell me their stories. Sometimes the only thing I can do is make sure they don't die cold and alone. And sometimes I have the joy of watching a newly healed bird fling itself back into the sky.

Kevin is building bat houses and birdfeeders and squirrel perches for me. And he's going to tear down the tool shed and build something better, sort of a triage sanctuary for outdoor beasties to take refuge in who can't or won't come into the house.

Dr Graykin was displeased with me for pulling my stitches, but she thinks that between the chemo and the surgery we'll get all the cancer cells. God, I hope so. But there's never any certainty in life, no guarantees, no promises. The only thing I can do is take each day as I can and do the best by it. Or, as someone once told me: "It doesn't matter how many legs you got. The important thing is the running."

Eugie's stories have been published, and are forthcoming, in a number of magazines and anthologies. After reading 'Running On Two Legs' please visit, if you haven't already done so, her website at www.eugiefoster.com.

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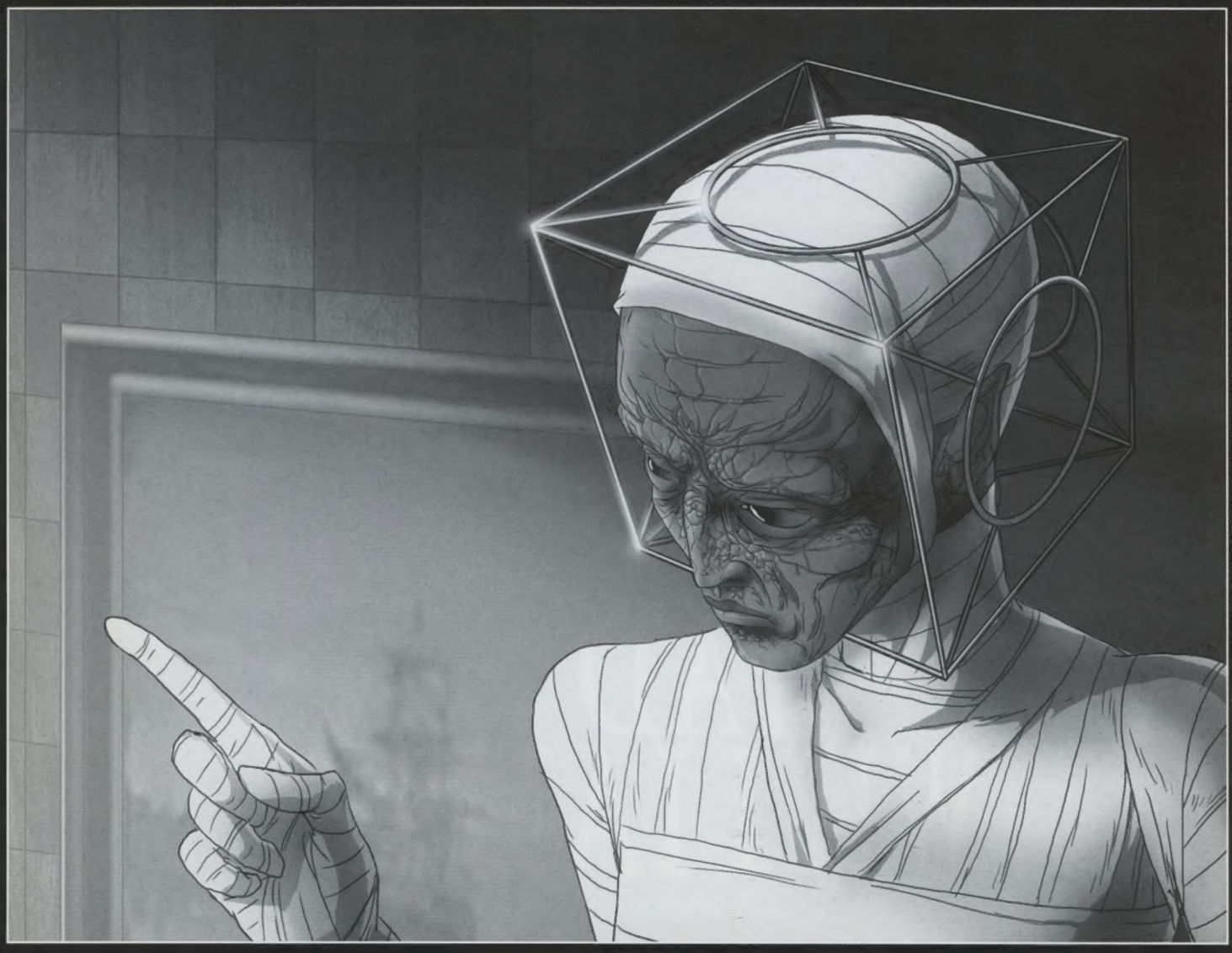

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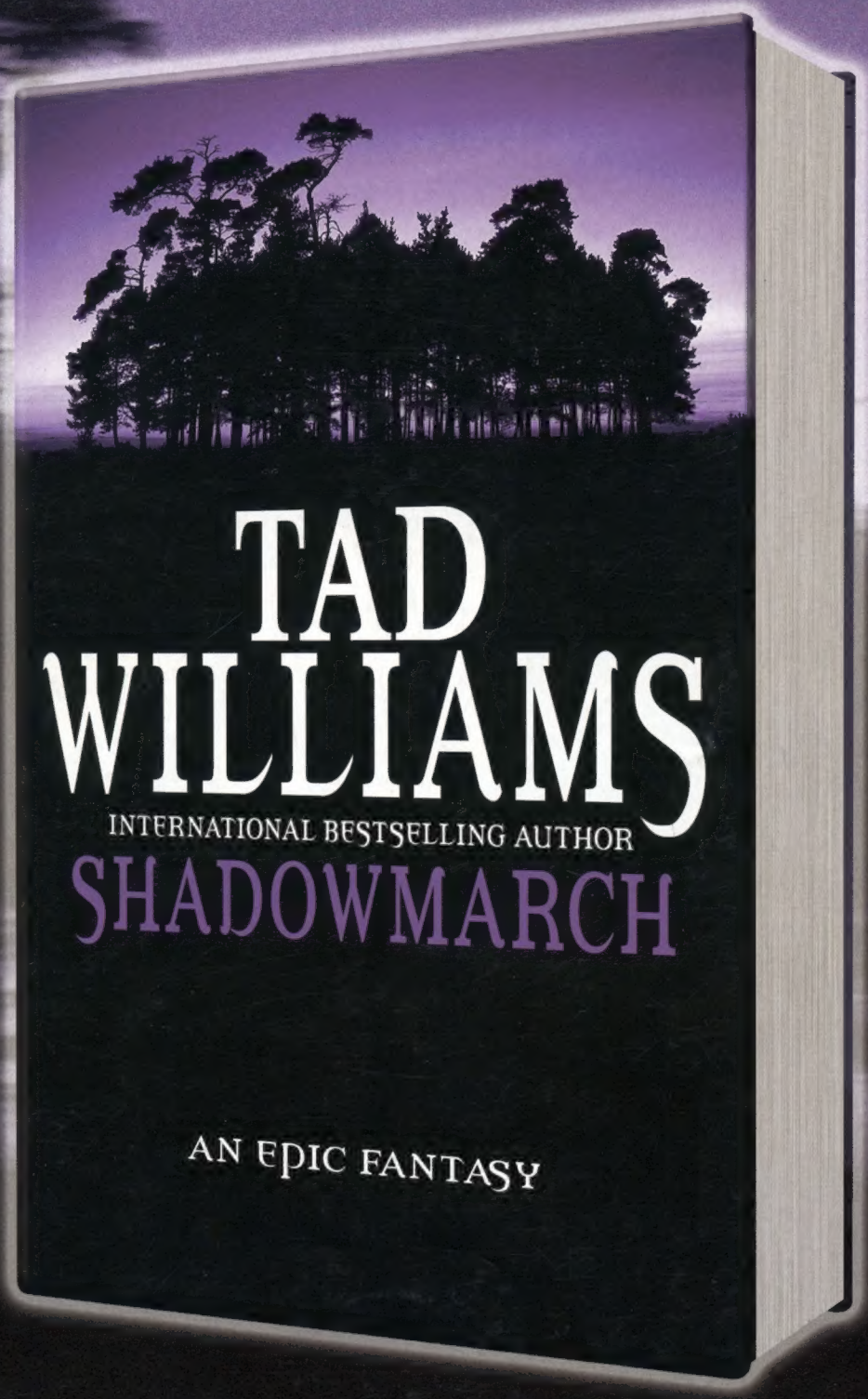

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